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'Germany is Back': The First Months of 'Außenkanzler' Friedrich Merz's Foreign Policy

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On 6 May 2025, the new coalition government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz assumed office in Germany. He succeeded Olaf Scholz, who – despite ambitious plans articulated in his *Zeitenwende* speech of 27 February 2022, delivered in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and intended to reorient German foreign and security policy – ultimately fell short of implementing many of the sweeping changes he had announced. Scholz's policy style was marked by caution, a reluctance to push ahead decisively and lead from the front, and a failure to articulate a new vision for Germany and Europe. Merz's style is markedly different – and so, too, are some of his initial policies.

This paper reviews the first few months of the Merz government's foreign and security policy, offering a preliminary (as it must necessarily remain) assessment of the continuities and shifts that have emerged. The focus lies on foreign and security matters for the sake of concision – and not least because Merz has actively cultivated an image as an 'Außenkanzler', or 'foreign chancellor', signalling a personal preference for external affairs over the arguably more contentious and often more thankless domestic subjects of taxation, economic reform, immigration, and welfare state reform. This paper argues that, while Merz has changed the tone and style of German foreign policy, he has departed from some of the premises laid down by his predecessor but maintained others. His first few months in office can be summarised by three themes: more money, more assertive leadership – both within government and abroad – and greater visibility.

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Looking Back: Scholz's Foreign Policy and the Zeitenwende in a Nutshell

When Scholz declared a *Zeitenwende* in February 2022, he gave voice to a long-overdue recognition: that German foreign and security policy was no longer fit for purpose in light of the new geopolitical landscape of the 2020s. Decades of reduced military spending and a shrinking Bundeswehr had left Germany ill-equipped to deter an increasingly assertive, expansionist, and aggressive Russia. After the end of the Cold War, security policy had focused on managing out-of-area crises and their potential indirect effects on Germany – epitomised by former Defence Minister Peter Struck's infamous assertion that Germany's security was being defended at the Hindu Kush, used to justify the Bundeswehr's deployment in Afghanistan. The military capabilities required for such missions were rapid-response forces: small, mobile, and specialised.

However, with the return of war to the heart of Europe – since Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea – it became clear that territorial defence, long relegated to Cold War history, was once again a pressing concern. The Bundeswehr, like many other European armed forces, required significant rearmament: more funding, more personnel, more weapons, tanks, and aircraft. Scholz's *Zeitenwende* recognised this strategic shift and allocated a €100 billion special fund to support the necessary reforms. Yet it quickly became evident that this sum was not enough to meet Germany's defence needs – and that implementation of the policy lagged behind rhetoric.

The blame for that is to be found partly in the lengthiness of military procurement. As has been pointed out many times, one cannot simply buy tanks off a supermarket shelf. But intra-government issues also mattered. Surprisingly, the Greens – despite their roots in the pacifist movements of the 1980s – showed considerable pragmatism and realism about the need to rebuild Germany's defence capabilities and support for Ukraine. In contrast, resistance was more entrenched within Scholz's own SPD. This tension was most visible in Germany's Ukraine policy. Scholz acknowledged Ukraine's right to self-defence and the need for military support, yet he remained hesitant to provide Kyiv with advanced systems that might enhance Ukraine's offensive capabilities. As a consequence, while Germany became one of Ukraine's largest supporters in financial and military terms, Scholz was reluctant to supply weapons such as Leopard tanks or Taurus cruise missiles. He was not alone: then-U.S. President Joe Biden also hesitated over certain capabilities, particularly those that might be used on Russian territory, while the UK, France and others were more forthcoming with support to Ukraine even in these categories. Scholz eventually authorised the delivery of Leopard tanks but stood firm in withholding Taurus missiles. His justification – that Germany risked becoming a party to the conflict – was largely unconvincing, as the mere provision of military materiel does not make a country a war party. This also put Germany in marked contrast to decisions taken by allies such as the UK and France.

In all likelihood, this hesitation can at least partly be attributed to a die-hard strand of romanticised *Ostpolitik* thinking within parts of the SPD. This policy, made famous by Willy Brandt in the 1970s, was built on the notion that increased engagement with the Soviet Union would eventually move it towards reforms, and is best encapsulated in the notion of change through rapprochement – *Wandel durch Annäherung*. Arguably, *Ostpolitik* in the Cold War was a successful policy. However, after unification in 1990 and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ostpolitik took a more economic turn, and *Wandel durch Annäherung* became *Wandel durch Handel*: betting that deepening economic entanglement

with Russia would reduce the risk of future conflict and foster liberalisation in Russia. The invasion of Ukraine ultimately proved this thinking wrong. In practice, Germany's growing dependence on cheap Russian energy only emboldened Putin's foreign policy ambitions abroad and handed him an instrument of blackmail vis-à-vis Germany and Europe, while at the same time, domestically, he firmed his authoritarian grip – granting him a degree of control that even some Soviet leaders lacked. Yet certain Russophile elements within the SPD appear to still cling to *Ostpolitik* as a workable policy and advocate for a more conciliatory and forgiving attitude towards Russia, and they may have exerted influence on Scholz's approach to arms deliveries.

In other foreign-policy fields, the record was also underwhelming. In terms of further European integration and co-operation in defence, little impetus emerged from Germany after the Russian invasion, despite leadership from Europe's biggest country being desperately needed. Worse, the Franco-German engine – long seen as the driving force of European integration – was stuttering: Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron did not warm to one another, and what followed were French proposals – many half-baked at best – and German rebuttals, either directly or through indifference. On the world stage, Germany offered little initiative on broader global issues either – from climate change to Israel's conduct in Gaza. For a country that often portrays itself as a champion of international law and a rules-based order, silence on clear humanitarian law violations in Gaza during an escalating crisis of terrible proportions was deafening and cost Germany influence and respect in much of the Global South. Moreover, although Scholz enjoyed a cooperative relationship with U.S. President Biden, questions loomed about his capacity to manage a second Trump presidency. Scholz's record suggests he would have struggled.

Overall, while he deserves credit for acknowledging and initiating the strategic transformation required in Germany and Europe, Scholz failed to fully deliver on the promises of the *Zeitenwende*. Structural constraints were partly beyond his immediate control – most notably the constitutional debt brake – and limited his room for manoeuvre. His three-party coalition was fragile and prone to crisis. Global geopolitical developments were also stacked against him. Yet his overly cautious nature and disposition also seemed ill-suited to the demands of the time.

Germany Is Back: Merz's Foreign Policy

When Friedrich Merz moved into the Chancellery on 6 May 2025, expectations were high – stoked not least by Merz himself. What was immediately evident was his difference in posture, style, and tone compared with Scholz. The first advantage he enjoys – though not of his own making – is his physical presence: at nearly 2 m tall, at summits for instance, he stands out where Scholz disappeared in the crowd. In dealing with someone as fixated on superficialities as Donald Trump, Merz appeared more imposing, which may have contributed – even subliminally – to earning Trump's respect.

More significant, however, was the contrast in leadership style. Scholz had been cautious and understated; Merz projected authority and decisiveness, sometimes to the extent that some of his statements seemed rushed. In that sense, the contrast between Scholz and Merz could hardly be starker. After three years of seeming foreign policy inaction and hesitation, Merz made a very symbolic start. Immediately upon his election, he flew to Paris and Warsaw,

reaffirming and reviving Germany's commitment to Franco-German and Polish-German relations and breathing symbolic life back into the Weimar Triangle. The message was unambiguous: Germany is back on the European stage and ready to show more responsibility – and leadership.

Later, Merz travelled to Washington for his inaugural meeting with Trump on 5 June 2025 – a trip that had previously caused evident anxiety in Berlin, especially after the hostile and public treatment Volodymyr Zelensky and Cyril Ramaphosa had received in the Oval Office – and was carefully rehearsed. As Trump meetings go, it went well: no breakthroughs on tariffs or on rock-solid NATO Article 5 assurances, but crucially, no new crises either. In today's climate, that passes as a success and laid the groundwork for a workable relationship between Merz and Trump that was soon followed up with further talks on Ukraine and NATO. At other summits, too, Merz reiterated his determination for Germany to play a bigger part. In terms of how he conducts foreign policy, the change is clear.
Domestically – but also in terms of foreign policy significance – Merz's biggest structural move so far has been fiscal-institutional. In March 2025, before the new Bundestag had constituted itself and relying on majorities in the old parliament, cross-party votes amended the constitution to exempt defence spending above 1 per cent of GDP from the debt brake and to establish a €500 billion multi-year infrastructure fund to modernise infrastructure, including defence-related elements. This shift helped unlock a coalition with the SPD and enables Germany not only to meet NATO's 2 per cent target but to aim for 5 per cent defence spending (3.5 per cent on military equipment, plus likely 1.5 per cent on related infrastructure) by 2029 – well ahead of NATO's 2035 benchmark. Merz also pledged to make the Bundeswehr Europe's strongest conventional force. Europe's biggest country and economy – which enjoys more fiscal wiggle room than many others – thus opened its purse and sent a strong signal of intent to its allies (and foes). In contrast to Scholz, whose hands were tied by fiscal constraints, Merz appears determined to lead by example. This ambition, however, comes at a cost, and some commentators almost seem to forget that there is no such thing as free money. While increased spending on defence and infrastructure is certainly much needed and necessary, this extensive new wave of borrowing will add to Germany's long-term debt and interest obligations.

On Ukraine, Merz essentially continues his predecessor's policy. Germany remains committed to Ukraine's self-defence, although no decision has been made to deliver the Taurus missiles he once criticised Scholz for withholding. In May 2025, he publicly affirmed Ukraine's right to strike legitimate military targets inside Russia – something the previous government had left ambiguous – but this merely acknowledged an existing reality.

On one of the most delicate issues in German foreign policy – Israel and Gaza – Merz has only recently somewhat departed from the broad line of his predecessor after having initially even doubled down in some respects. After Israeli strikes on Iran on 13 June 2025, he publicly praised the action, declaring himself 'grateful to Israel for doing the dirty work for us all.' Recently, though, on Gaza, Germany has stepped up its criticims and called more loudly for Israel to show restraint. Merz has refrained from following leaders like Macron and Starmer, who have signalled the possibility of recognising Palestinian statehood if Israel does not change its conduct. Against the backdrop of rising public pressure in Germany, it will now have to be seen to what extent the government will change its policy.

On other global issues – such as the defence of the rules-based international order, multilateralism, free trade, or climate change – no major initiatives or leadership from Germany have yet emerged either. Naturally, all of these issues will be understood – in Berlin just as much as elsewhere in Europe – as functions of the relationship with the US. As long as Europe depends on America – especially for its own defence and nuclear deterrence – Trump holds a de facto veto on many global issues, and openly confronting the US on those might come at a cost that Berlin, and Europe, are unwilling to pay.

In essence, across many foreign-policy areas, the new government has largely maintained the strategic lines of its predecessor. But there is now an evident willingness to provide Germany with the resources needed to defend itself and Europe – and to lead by example, or perhaps just to lead at all. How Merz continues in this regard remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the most apparent change lies in how Merz personally conducts foreign policy – a field he seems very comfortable in and committed to – hence the early nickname 'Außenkanzler'. Institutionally, the cabinet has just approved plans for a National Security Council based in the Chancellery, consolidating strategic foreign and security coordination there and giving Merz more control over it. The set-up of the government helps: for the first time since the 1960s, the Chancellor and the Foreign Minister hail from the same party (CDU), reducing intra-coalition friction and increasing the chancellor's sway. Nevertheless, the change in tone, and the commitment to higher defence spending and leadership, seem to indicate a willingness on the part of Merz to put real substance into the *Zeitenwende* notion and to assume more German responsibility in Europe – especially on defence. The test now is to match rhetoric and symbolism with tangible outcomes.

Future Challenges

Europe would benefit from German leadership as the continent continues to build up its defences – not only against Putin's aggressive Russia, but also against erratic and unpredictable policies coming out of the White House. For now, Europe urgently needs the United States for its defence, and this has become very apparent: Ursula von der Leyen recently agreed to a tariff deal with Trump that many criticised as a sign of weakness vis-à-vis the Americans, as products from European companies entering the U.S. will be subject to a 15% tariff, while no new duties will be levied on American goods coming into the EU. And it certainly was agreed from a position of weakness. Not economically – if the EU had wanted to assert itself against the Americans, it likely could have done so, and probably quite effectively – but the deal must be seen in the context of Trump's swaggering stance on NATO, Article 5, and the inclusion of Europe in America's nuclear deterrence strategies.

Aside from the fact that the tariff deal might leave Europe better off than the U.S. – which, in all likelihood, will face growing inflation as products across the board, regardless of origin, become more expensive (unlike those imported into Europe) – it stands to reason that Trump had no hesitation in using his NATO commitment as a bargaining chip in trade negotiations. As Europe might not (yet) be in a position to effectively defend itself without American help, von der Leyen had few options in such a scenario of blackmail.

Merz (and Europe) will have to continue dealing with a U.S. administration that is difficult to predict – one that might change its stance or policy on a daily, perhaps even hourly, basis, and that does not seem to be restrained by traditions, alliances, morality, or institutions. In this new transatlantic reality, everything is overtly transactional.

China presents another formidable challenge. Thus far, Merz has articulated no new direction, and existing policies remain in place – for now, at least. It remains to be seen how much controversy the Europeans are willing to risk with China – a country that is at least rhetorically committed to multilateralism, free trade, and the rules-based international order, holds significant sway in the Global South, and is integral to European supply chains – at a time when Europe is already under pressure from both Russia and the United States.

The Middle East will also continue to demand attention, even if and when the war in Gaza ends. Iran, Yemen, Syria, Libya and other conflicts remain far from resolved and could erupt into regional crises at any moment.

Finally, the greatest challenge of all demands urgent attention: global warming continues to affect the entire planet – and with increasing intensity. Yet the current international political climate is arguably the least conducive in a decade or more to identifying and implementing meaningful solutions. One can only hope that German leadership – in and through Europe – will not lose sight of this most consequential of all issues.

Conclusion

In terms of foreign policy, after a rocky start securing his election in the Bundestag, Friedrich Merz has hit the ground running. 'Germany is back' is perhaps the best way to describe his performance over the past few months in this field. After years of being a de facto bystander, the German government is once again at the heart of many of the most pertinent discussions and negotiations in Europe and seems to have the determination and resources not only to talk the talk but also to walk the walk. For this reason alone, one can only hope that Merz keeps the label of 'Außenkanzler' – and will indeed live up to it. Perhaps, then, Merz, together with his European partners, will demonstrate the commitment and leadership needed to confront the many serious challenges that lie ahead.

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