

BRIEF

GERMANY'S NEW MILITARY
CONCEPT
RESPONSIBILITY FOR EUROPE

| LUCA ROGERS | FELIX GASPER |

Germany has published its first-ever comprehensive military concept, which envisions the *Bundeswehr* becoming the strongest conventional army in Europe. But Germany's struggles with implementing its *Zeitenwende* illustrate the difficulty it sometimes has in turning vision into reality.

The new concept builds on 2023's National Security Strategy and Defence Policy Guidelines.¹ It broadly consists of two elements: the military strategy, which outlines how the *Bundeswehr* intends to fight, and a capability profile, which defines the means with which it will do so. Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has emphasised that much of the document must remain classified, as otherwise, "we might as well add Mr Putin to the joint email distribution list right away."² The published version is rather vague and specifies neither concrete defence plans nor weapons systems. Yet it is ripe with grand statements about Germany's place in Europe's future security arrangements.

RUSSIA, RUSSIA, AND RUSSIA

The concept assumes that, given multiple global crises and the largest war in Europe since 1945, Germany's security situation is unlikely to improve in the coming years. It thus confronts the German public with an uncomfortable reality that has all too often been dismissed in the past decades: the possibility of a full-scale war between Russia and NATO. It also notes that Germany is meanwhile threatened by Russia's grey-zone activities.³ It leaves no doubt that the *Bundeswehr* must be capable of enduring a prolonged, high-intensity conflict with Russia,

which may be able to challenge NATO as early as 2029. By then, according to Chief of Defence General Carsten Breuer, Russia's military buildup will be complete, and the outcomes of key elections will be known.⁴ In the case of an attack, Germany's institutions and society will also be key, and high levels of civil preparedness will be needed across critical infrastructure, logistics, and healthcare to support the *Bundeswehr*.⁵

According to the concept, Russia may be able to challenge NATO as early as 2029

In this sense, the concept serves not only as a strategic framework but also as a basis for public discussion. It is a strong reminder that Germany's security environment has deteriorated significantly, and, against this backdrop, the country is compelled to take drastic measures.

CAPABILITIES AND READINESS

To implement the concept, the *Bundeswehr* is to expand significantly and acquire new capabilities. By 2035, the active component is to increase from 186 000 to 260 000 and the reserves from 70 000 to 200 000.⁶ These aims, however, are intended as flexible benchmarks, rather than strict targets.⁷ Pistorius has thus described the concept as a "living document."⁸ A baseline level of operational readiness is to be established by 2029, while the longer-term goal is to achieve technological superiority beyond 2039.⁹

The *Neue Reserve* strategy also seeks to integrate Germany's reservists into the active

force on an equal basis to the regulars. Their tasks will include protecting critical infrastructure, securing logistics and transport routes, and enabling Germany's role as a central hub for NATO operations, whilst also sustaining combat readiness and deterrence.¹⁰

Guided by principles of a 'single set of forces' and a 'one-theatre approach', the *Bundeswehr's* training and structure are to be oriented primarily towards Russian threats.¹¹ It will shift from a post-Cold War model of a specialised, professional force focused on out-of-area deployments to a conventional military, focused on territorial and Alliance defence and NATO's eastern flank.¹² Existing systems and platforms will be replaced, with priority areas including force projection, troop mobility, integrated air and missile defence, and deep-strike capabilities.

At the same time, the concept stresses that tensions, conflicts, and wars are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The *Bundeswehr* must also be prepared for contingencies in other regions and for threats arising in multiple domains, including cyber and space, that further blur the line between war and peace. Adversaries will seek to exploit vulnerabilities wherever they arise, reinforcing the need for a comprehensive and adaptable force posture.

The Bundeswehr will shift from a post-Cold War model to a conventional military, focused on territorial and Alliance defence

SMARTER ENABLEMENT

Problems with high-visibility projects such as the training ship *Gorch Fock* and the Future Combat Air System have raised doubts about the efficiency and capacity for innovation in the current procurement management process.¹³ In his remarks on the concept, Pistorius also emphasised lessons from Ukraine's experience in fighting Russia and highlighted the need to keep pace with rapidly evolving capabilities and technologies deployed on the battlefield. The concept thus emphasises that innovation must accelerate and directs the *Bundeswehr* to seek to benefit from close links with innovators, researchers, and other economic actors.¹⁴ This

new approach is intended to increase flexibility and reform procurement processes that have traditionally struggled with speed and scalability.

Meanwhile, the Agenda for De-bureaucratisation and Modernisation aims to reduce bureaucracy within the Ministry of Defence and the *Bundeswehr*.¹⁵ It contains 153 measures intended to streamline processes, enhance digitalisation, and strengthen innovation. They include the use of AI to optimise workflows, a digital *Bundeswehr* wallet for essential documents, and a centralised platform for core services. Excessive regulations are to be replaced with a more flexible, trust-based approach, alongside a culture that encourages learning from mistakes.

THE ALLIES

The concept's title, "Responsibility for Europe," reflects Germany's understanding that, as Europe's largest economy, it must assume greater responsibility for the security of its Allies too. While the *Bundeswehr* will grow to ensure credible deterrence and defence, it will continue to operate within NATO structures. Germany's ambition is to be a leading power in Europe while remaining firmly embedded in the transatlantic Alliance. As the US increasingly seeks to detach itself from European security, Germany stresses that "NATO must become more European to remain transatlantic."¹⁶

Germany's brigade in Lithuania, its first permanent stationing of a large force abroad, is its most notable commitment to Baltic and broader European security, while a recent NATO decision assigns the 1 German–Netherlands Corps to a command role for Estonia and Latvia.¹⁷ The *Luftwaffe*, meanwhile, regularly contributes to NATO's enhanced Baltic Air Policing mission, and German naval and air forces are taking part in NATO's Baltic Sentry mission, set up following the severing of several undersea pipelines and cables in 2023–24.¹⁸ Germany also hosts the Commander Task Force Baltic headquarters in Rostock, responsible for NATO maritime command in the Baltic Sea region.¹⁹ Germany's rearmament efforts and its renewed vigilance toward Russia, as outlined in the concept, should be welcome news for the Baltic states, who can expect a stronger German commitment to their security. More broadly, a

more capable Germany within a more self-reliant Europe can only add to European security as a whole

CHALLENGES

To deliver credible deterrence, the new concept must, of course, be implemented. Germany's slow progress in realising its 2022 *Zeitenwende* illustrates the difficulty the country sometimes has in turning vision into reality. The key political challenge is that consensus on the strategic shift outlined in Chancellor Scholz's speech has yet to fully take hold.

Parts of the political spectrum, for example, are still very attached to the idea of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade). Others have called for disarmament talks with Russia and for the renewal of Russian gas imports in the case of an armistice in Ukraine.²⁰ The persistence of a long-standing belief that dialogue alone with Russia can guarantee security and that military strength is unnecessary indicates that elements of Germany's political class have yet to fully internalise the gravity of the current security environment.

Elements of Germany's political class have yet to fully internalise the gravity of the current security environment

Ultimately, Germany must not only rearm militarily but also find consensus in redefining its strategic culture for a Europe no longer at peace. With the far-right AfD becoming stronger, the next federal election, expected in 2029, is increasingly viewed as pivotal for Germany's defence trajectory. In a system in which military procurement remains under parliamentary oversight, with all contracts above €25 mn requiring Budget Committee approval, Germany's *Zeitenwende* remains tied to political realities.

More practically, Germany may struggle to deliver the personnel targets established in the concept. It will first seek to meet these through voluntary service and positive incentives, but will likely have to resort to compulsory service if these measures prove insufficient.²¹ Against the

backdrop of limited willingness among German youth to serve and growing protests over the prospect of stricter military obligations, Germany will have to reconcile mounting security demands with domestic political and societal constraints.²²

CONCLUSION

Germany's 2022 *Zeitenwende* and now its first comprehensive concept for military defence offer some hope that the country is taking its own and Europe's defence seriously. The challenge so far, however, has not been a lack of understanding at the conceptual level, but a failure of implementation.

The concept provides a solid basis for credible defence and deterrence, but its ultimate success will depend on whether it translates into tangible capabilities. Defence spending is unlikely to be the primary obstacle, as Germany has committed to spending "whatever it takes."²³ But the current pace of defence reform, Germany's limited strategic foresight, and an underdeveloped strategic culture raise doubts that its ambitious capability targets will be met.

Germany, like all Allies, must also confront the need to balance the speed and practicality of off-the-shelf purchases to address urgent needs with the longer-term requirement of European self-reliance. It cannot fall once again into strategically unfavourable dependencies that leave it vulnerable to the different priorities and whims of others. Pistorius' recent visit to Kyiv and the agreement of new German–Ukrainian joint ventures, however, point to a way for Germany to close urgent capability gaps while advancing a more European approach to rearmament.²⁴

Germany must also address the ingrained perceptions that Russia remains—or, at least, can once again become—a viable partner. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's credo that "[we] do not negotiate with terrorists," while expressed in very different political circumstances, might still be a useful guideline in today's security environment.²⁵

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ministry of Defence of Germany [BMVg], [The Overall Concept of Military Defence. Military Strategy and Plan for the Armed Forces. Responsibility for Europe](#) (BMVg, 22 April 2026); Ministry of Economic Affairs of Germany, [Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany, National Security Strategy](#) (Ministry of Economic Affairs, June 2023); Ministry of Defence of Germany, [Defence Policy Guidelines](#) (Ministry of Defence, 10 November 2023).
- ² BMVg, ["Minister: „Wir brauchen das richtige Personal"](#) [Minister: We need the right staff]," 22 April 2026.
- ³ BMVg, [The Overall Concept of Military Defence](#), 15.
- ⁴ Bundeswehr, ["General Breuer erklärt die strategische Ausrichtung der Bundeswehr"](#) [General Breuer explains the Bundeswehr's strategic direction]," 22 April 2026.
- ⁵ BMVg, [The Overall Concept of Military Defence](#), 30.
- ⁶ Bundeswehr, ["Grundlagendokumente zur strategischen Ausrichtung der Bundeswehr"](#) [Key documents on the strategic direction of the Bundeswehr]," 22 April 2026.
- ⁷ ["NATO-Partner erwarten Führungs-rolle von Deutschland"](#) ["NATO partners expect Germany to take a leading role"], *Tagesschau*, 22 April 2026.
- ⁸ BMVg, "Minister: „Wir brauchen das richtige Personal."
- ⁹ BMVg, [The Overall Concept of Military Defence](#), 27.
- ¹⁰ Bundeswehr, "Grundlagendokumente zur strategischen Ausrichtung der Bundeswehr."
- ¹¹ BMVg, [The Overall Concept of Military Defence](#), 11, 23, 30, 31.
- ¹² Bundeswehr, ["Starke Bundeswehr für Abschreckung und Verteidigung"](#) [A strong Bundeswehr for deterrence and defence]," c. 2026; BMVg, [The Overall Concept of Military Defence](#), 13.
- ¹³ ["Gorch Fock": Chronologie einer Instandsetzung von 2015 bis 2021](#) ['Gorch Fock': Chronology of repairs from 2015 to 2021]," *NDR*, 16 May 2024; Chris Lunday, Laura Kayali, ["Germany explores how to replace France in Europe's flagship fighter jet project,"](#) *Politico*, 18 September 2025.
- ¹⁴ BMVg, [The Overall Concept of Military Defence](#), 27, 28.
- ¹⁵ Nina Werkhäuser, ["Germany unveils first-ever military strategy for Bundeswehr,"](#) *DW*, 23 April 2026.
- ¹⁶ BMVg, [The Overall Concept of Military Defence](#), 19.
- ¹⁷ Ministries of Defence of Germany and the Netherlands, ["Joint press release German and The Netherlands Ministry of Defence,"](#) 28 May 2026.
- ¹⁸ NATO, ["Germany continues to strengthen NATO Air Policing mission from Latvia,"](#) 16 September 2024.
- ¹⁹ Bundeswehr, ["Security in the Baltic Sea – Task Force Baltic maintains the maritime situation Picture,"](#) 20 November 2025.
- ²⁰ Adam Serak, ["U.S. troops still in Germany as Berlin floats talks with Russia,"](#) *Poland Daily24*, 4 May 2026; ["Eastern German Premier Wants Russian Energy After Ukraine War Ends,"](#) *Ground News*, 15 November 2025.
- ²¹ Thomas Röwekamp (CDU), ["The Master Plan: Europe's Grand Strategy,"](#) Lennart Meri Conference, YouTube, 18:00–18:45, 17 May 2026.
- ²² Ben Knight, ["German high school students protest against military service,"](#) *DW*, 3 May 2026.
- ²³ Paul Kirby, ["Germany's Merz promises to do 'whatever it takes' on defence,"](#) *BBC*, 5 March 2025.
- ²⁴ ["Pistorius Makes Unannounced Visit to Kyiv for Defense Production Talks,"](#) *Kyiv Post*, 11 May 2026.
- ²⁵ Russell A. Berman, ["Helmut Schmidt, 1918–2015: A German 'Macher',"](#) *Hoover*, 10 November 2015.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

FELIX GASPER

Felix Gasper is Junior Research Fellow at ICDS.

LUCA ROGERS

Luca Rogers is a research intern of ICDS.

-  ICDS.TALLINN
-  @ICDS-TALLINN.BSKY.SOCIAL
-  @ICDS_TALLINN
-  ICDS-TALLINN
-  WWW.ICDS.EE



Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely of its author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the International Centre for Defence and Security or any other organisation.

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND SECURITY
63/4 NARVA RD., 10120 TALLINN, ESTONIA
INFO@ICDS.EE

ISSN 2228-2076