

BRIEF

GERMANY'S POSITION ON
CSDP: IS THERE ANYTHING
FOR THE BALTICS?GERMANY AND BALTIC SECURITY
SERIES, NO. 3

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Germany has a major impact on the EU's direction, agenda, and reforms. For the Baltic states, Germany has always been an important political and economic partner in the EU, but regarding the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) relations have been quite limited. The new government in Germany places strong emphasis on European sovereignty raising the question: will this rhetoric be translated into political action and what impact will it have on EU policies?

CSDP IN GERMANY: VISION,
INTERESTS AND GOALS

Germany is the essential EU member state. Its size and pro-European political stance have helped it to carve out a significant role in European policy shaping and making. It has stood behind major political and economic changes in the EU and often led in agenda setting. But for a long time, Germany shied away from EU defence questions, focusing instead on NATO as the main actor in this area. More recently, however, it has actively participated in major debates about the CSDP. These have often been dominated by the opposing positions of France and the UK, with Germany advocating for the middle ground. With the UK's departure from the EU, the power balance has changed, and Germany has also become one of the focal points for development of the CSDP.

Germany considers the CSDP in the broader perspective as part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which it views as a means to strengthen the role of the EU on a global

scale. Germany is thus an active contributor to CFSP-related frameworks and projects.¹ In regard to the CSDP, however, it has been less outspoken. As one analyst notes, "successive Merkel governments were not interested and/or willing in investing more in European defence and in deepening the capabilities of CSDP".²

The main reasons for the lack of Germany's interest in the CSDP have included its strategic partnerships with Russia and the US and a generally reluctant attitude towards investment in defence. However, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a game changer that came as a major shock to the German establishment and demonstrated the continuing importance of geopolitics and military power. Another tipping point was the election of Donald Trump which put into question one of the main pillars of German foreign policy – the alliance with the US. Together with increased illegal migration,

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terrorism, nationalism and populism, these factors prompted Germany to seek to strengthen the EU and to give European defence policy a new impetus.³ Starting with signing the Bratislava Declaration in 2016 and continuing with the first major achievement of the renewed CSDP, the launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) defence initiative in 2017, Germany showed active leadership in shaping EU security and defence policy.

THE PESCO DEBATE

Three main German priorities for the CSDP can be identified: to preserve the sovereignty of Europe, to further integrate EU defence, and to avoid weakening of commitment to NATO.⁴ These priorities were behind Germany's vision for an inclusive PESCO, which concentrated on integrating civilian and military capabilities, strengthening the European defence industry and, above all, avoiding creating additional divisions within the EU.⁵ This position contrasted with that of France which argued for a more ambitious and exclusive path for the "more able European nations".⁶ The essential difference between the German and French models is the level of ambition which the EU as a global actor should aim to achieve. As German analysts Major and Mölling argue: "Berlin's main motivation was not primarily to increase the EU's defence capabilities to act, but to maintain and even strengthen the EU as the central political framework."⁷ Meanwhile, France suggested high entry criteria and strong operational commitments, aiming for a very ambitious and efficient framework.⁸ The three Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – have since the beginning supported the German model as it proposed a way for small states to also have a seat at the table. Moreover, the German position seemed to be more in line with the general pro-Atlanticist stance of the Baltics.

AUTONOMY AND SOVEREIGNTY

Although the 2017 Memorandum on PESCO was eventually drafted according to the German vision, Germany has since seemingly stepped back, leaving the leadership role to France, which has become a strong advocate of European

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strategic autonomy. This term is based on France's national experience of the post-Second World War transformation of its own defence, which was referenced in the famous Sorbonne speech by the French president Emmanuel

Macron.⁹ Germany and the Baltic states, as well as many others in the EU, have become quite critical of the concept of European strategic autonomy, anxious that it might negatively impact transatlantic relations, but also fearing it could become a strategy to implement French strategic interests at the EU level.

In December 2021, Germany's new Chancellor Olaf Scholz replaced Angela Merkel after 16 years in office. Together with his team, Scholz spoke firmly about the need to consider the state of relations with Russia, China and the US, and to focus more on Europe's security and defence matters.¹⁰ However, despite the changing geopolitical context, it seems unlikely that the German position on CSDP will radically change with the new government. Although European strategic autonomy is in line with the general goal of the new Chancellor in regard to "strengthening the European Union on the global stage", Germany's political and historical background, its attitude towards military issues and its striving for continuity, will favour the status quo.¹¹ In the strategic autonomy debate, Germany is arguing for the more nuanced and inclusive concept of strategic sovereignty, which also emphasises the importance of supply chains, economy and health.

CAN GERMANY BECOME THE BALTIC STATES' MAIN PARTNER IN EUROPEAN DEFENCE?

Defence cooperation between the Baltic states and Germany takes place against the backdrop of the extensive interaction between all member states of the EU and NATO. However, due to Germany's strategic partnership with Russia and the development of projects such as Nord Stream 2, this cooperation has been quite superficial. The UK, which was always sceptical of the CSDP, and a strong advocate of the transatlantic link was, until 2016, the member state that most influenced the positions of the

Baltic states on European defence. Brexit was a game changer in the existing political dynamics as, after the transition period, the UK no longer had any official input into the development of the CSDP. This shift of power balance in EU

strategic affairs from tripolar towards bipolar has left other member states with fewer options for alternative CSDP strategic models.

From the Baltic states' perspective, the French approach to CSDP has always been too ambitious, too anti-American and too much oriented towards Africa and Europe's southern dimension. The Baltic states are naturally inclined to lean more towards Germany, and have become more so due to its changing position on Russia since the annexation of Crimea, its contribution to the security of the region in the form of air policing and enhanced Forward Presence commitments, and its contribution to the Eastern partnership policy.¹² But above all, Germany's support for a CSDP that was NATO-friendly, all-inclusive, with a strong civilian orientation, and a clear focus on non-duplication matched the vision preferred in the Baltics. As long as there is no duplication of NATO's processes, the Baltic states are ready to accept the recent CSDP developments as pragmatic rather than unnecessary, and believe that "strategic autonomy should be focused on areas where the EU can provide added value to their regional defence efforts, for example through joint capability programmes or coordination on hybrid threats in relation to its Eastern neighbor".¹³

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PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS

Despite the strengthening of ties in defence between Germany and the Baltic states, in practical terms there are few areas for potential cooperation between them. Joint participation in CSDP operations has been limited in recent years as the four countries have been involved in few military operations overall. In general, Germany tends to prefer civilian CSDP operations over military CSDP operations, while the Baltic states have few capabilities to contribute to these missions and tend to focus on those in their own neighbourhood.

Cooperation in other CSDP-related areas, for instance in PESCO projects, has also been limited. The German perspective on new CSDP initiatives tends to focus on political commitment rather than delivering real defence capabilities.¹⁴ The Baltic states, by contrast, are interested in developing physical capabilities. One example of where cooperation with Germany is crucial for the Baltic states is the PESCO Military Mobility project. Germany and Latvia are also taking part in another PESCO project led by Estonia – the Integrated Unmanned Ground System – which could promote closer cooperation in the future. But in general, the differences in capacities and the size of the defence industries in the respective countries limit cooperation in the PESCO framework between the Baltic states and Germany. In the longer run, it is possible that these obstacles will be overcome as the EU puts a strong emphasis on the inclusion of small member states and small and medium-sized enterprises in PESCO projects.

A GERMAN BRAKE?

The French presidency of the Council of the European Union (January – June 2022) and the forthcoming EU Strategic Compass have given rise to high expectations for various breakthroughs in the CSDP. In the past, closer cooperation between Germany and France served as a necessary precondition for such breakthroughs. For the Baltic states, it is important that any new developments within the CSDP should strengthen European security and defence capabilities and ensure resilience to outside threats, but at the same time not undermine NATO and the transatlantic link. They look to Germany to balance French ambitions and to direct the CSDP towards cooperation and better coordination with NATO, a focus on the civilian aspects of security, more attention to the Eastern neighbourhood, and the substitution of the concept of strategic autonomy with the more neutral concept of strategic sovereignty.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Nicole Alecu de Fler, "[CFSP Watch 2004: Germany](#)," European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy, 2004.
- ² Alberto Cunha, "[Post-Brexit EU Defence Policy: Is Germany Leading towards a European Army?](#)" E-International Relations, 5 July 2020.
- ³ Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, [PeSCo: the German Perspective](#) (Armament Industry European Research Group, February 2019).
- ⁴ Alberto Cunha, "Post-Brexit EU Defence Policy."
- ⁵ Alice Billon-Galland and Martin Quencez, "[Can France and Germany Make PESCO Work as a Process Toward EU Defense?](#)" The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 6 October 2017.
- ⁶ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, "[European Defence](#)," Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, July 2019.
- ⁷ Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, PeSCo: the German Perspective.
- ⁸ Alice Billon-Galland and Martin Quencez, "Can France and Germany Make PESCO."
- ⁹ "[President Macron gives speech in new initiative for Europe](#)," Élysée, 26 September 2017.
- ¹⁰ "[Germany's Olaf Scholz pushes for stronger EU, issues warning to Russia](#)," Deutsche Welle, 7 December 2021.
- ¹¹ "Germany's Olaf Scholz.,"; Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, PeSCo: the German Perspective.
- ¹² Germany has been the framework nation of the NATO enhanced Forward Presence battalion in Lithuania since 2017.
- ¹³ Margarita Šešelgytė, [Armament and Transatlantic Relationships: the Baltic States Perspective](#) (Armament Industry European Research Group, November 2019); Niklas Helwig et al., [A Northern Agenda for an Open and Secure Europe: Nordic-Baltic Perspectives on European Sovereignty and Strategic Autonomy](#) (Tallinn: ICDS, May 2021).
- ¹⁴ Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, PeSCo: the German Perspective.

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