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Germany and NATO's Eastern Flank. Conclusions for Poland¹

Summary

- Berlin's policy towards the Eastern Flank is characterized by a duality: the desire to maintain good relations with Russia and the aspiration to fulfill its NATO obligations. These competing ambitions translate into complex and sometimes contradictory policy stances.
- The German involvement in the Eastern Flank has significantly intensified after 2014. Germany is the leading nation of a multinational battalion battle group as a part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) and is actively engaged in the development of NATO's maritime security capabilities on the Baltic Sea.
- At the same time, the foreign ministry's "New Ostpolitik" indicates a clear strategic difference to Germa-

¹ This paper is inspired by the chapter M. Sus wrote on the engagement of Germany in the Baltic Sea Region that will be published in an edited volume by the US Army War College in Pennsylvania by the end of 2020.

ny's Eastern neighbors. In comparison to its partners on the Eastern Flank, Germany remains dovish on Russia. This also complicates her relations with the United States, and, as the announced withdrawal of US troops from Germany suggests, rifts in the transatlantic relationship start to affect security policy.

- There is a lack of cross-party consensus on the security priorities in Germany. Controversies surround Berlin's policy towards Moscow, i.e., the purpose of EU sanctions after the Russian annexation of Crimea, the level of defense spending in Germany, and, most recently, the German participation in the nuclear deterrence system provided by the US. This ambiguity complicates a coherent security and defense strategy.

Introduction

The aim of this analysis is to reflect on the German policy on NATO's Eastern Flank and its cooperation with Poland in particular. We start by discussing Berlin's political doctrine towards Russia as the overarching framework shaping an ambiguous policy towards the Eastern Flank. Our examination points to 2014 as a critical juncture that shifted the German threat perception of Russia and introduced a new foreign policy doctrine committed to "doing more", including on the Eastern Flank. We then turn to Germany's engagement on the ground and show that its presence has grown in recent years. We conclude with implications of Berlin's policy for Poland and formulate three policy recommendations for Polish decision-makers.

1. German political doctrine towards the Eastern partners

1.1. From reunification to annexation of Crimea

From the very beginning, German security and defense policy towards its Eastern neighbors was moderated by its policy towards Russia. The reunited Germany viewed a good relationship with Russia as an “important element for the future European security and stability system.”² Accordingly, the integration of the post-Soviet space into the West was to take place with Russian consent. At the same time, Germany also acknowledged its Eastern neighbors’ ambition to fill the post-Cold War security vacuum through NATO accession.³ Their reassurance became a competing policy goal; however, three factors complicated early German support for enlargement.

Firstly, Germany did not share the security concerns that motivated its eastern neighbors to seek NATO membership. Its own security concerns in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the early 1990s centered around internal instability and sectarian and ethnic strife. Accordingly, Germany defined its own goal to “bind the states of eastern Europe [...] as closely as possible to western structures and thusly prevent a development, which could lead to a fallback into confrontative behavior patterns.”⁴ This meant particularly

² *Zur Sicherheit Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Und Zur Lage Und Zukunft Der Bundeswehr*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975292/736102/64781348c12e4a80948ab1bdf25cf057/weissbuch-zur-sicherheitspolitik-2016-download-bmvg-data.pdf?download=1>, p. 29 [26.06.2020].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

supporting their transitions towards liberal democracy, and their European integration, but not outright NATO membership. For example, Germany actively supported the US-led Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative, aimed at familiarizing new democracies of the CEE with NATO command structures. However, the PfP was also a way not to expand NATO.⁵ A divergent threat perception from its Eastern neighbors is evident from the Ministry of Defense's strategy documents. "Defense Policy Guidelines" and "White Books" published in 1994, 2003, 2006 and 2011 fail to dedicate sections to the security of the Eastern Flank, while highlighting the potential of security cooperation with Russia.

Secondly, the Russian agreement to the NATO accession of a reunited Germany came with an understanding of no further expansion eastward. Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the US Secretary of State James Baker suggested, but did not promise, as much to Russian President Boris Yeltsin.⁶ While eventually this indication was replaced with financial compensation from Berlin to Moscow, the price for its own NATO accession also included Germany's compromised position on the accession of its Eastern neighbors. Yeltsin could, and would, lament the breaking of the "spirit" of the final settlement on German reunification.⁷ While the German position on NATO accession shifted in 1994, it continued to seek acceptance by Russia. The accession of Poland,

⁵ M. E. Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO The Debate inside the Clinton", *International Security*, 2019, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 7-41.

⁶ M. E. Sarotte, "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion", *Foreign Affairs*, 2014, vol. 93, no. 5, pp. 90-97.

⁷ M. E. Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO The Debate inside the Clinton", *International Security*, 2019, vol. 44, no. 1, p. 16.

the Czech Republic and Hungary in 1997 was preceded by signing of the NATO-Russia Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security, aimed at reassuring Russian security concerns over NATO's eastward expansion.⁸

Thirdly, viewing itself as having a “special relationship” with Russia, Germany made extensive efforts not to jeopardize it. Successive German governments aimed at establishing a long-term strategic partnership between NATO and Russia. The Permanent Joint Council (PJC) launched in 1997, the NATO-Russia Council that replaced it in 2002, and especially the OSCE, were supposed to be vehicles of rapprochement and trust-building between Russia and the West. The Chancellery under Helmut Kohl and later Gerhard Schröder carefully weighed Moscow's reaction to NATO expansion into the Baltics and its endorsement came only in 2002. Neither the crisis in Chechnya in 2004 nor in Georgia in 2008 changed the German ambition for closer ties to Russia, for example, via the Partnership for Modernization initiative launched in 2010. In 2012, the then foreign minister Guido Westerwelle postulated that “we cannot solve the challenges of our time without, much less against, but only together with a great nation like Russia.”⁹ This conviction explains the perseverance with which Germany recalls and insists on the fundamental steps of cooperation already achieved, such as the Helsinki Accords, Russia's signing of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the NATO-Russia

⁸ D. Trenin, *The End of EURASIA: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization*, 2001, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁹ G. Westerwelle, “Wir Sollten Putin Beim Wort Nehmen”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12.11.2012, <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/dokumente/wir-sollten-putin-beim-wort-nehmen-175220> [26.06.2020].

Act. Despite the fundamental changes discussed below, a strategic partnership between NATO and Russia remains Germany's long-term objective.¹⁰

1.2. New role, new threat perception

In 2014, the German security policy was fundamentally altered. In the face of an emerging crisis in Ukraine, Berlin was called upon to show more international commitment. In response, a triad of Germany's top officials pledged that Germany would take on more responsibility in the international arena at the 2014 Munich Security Conference.¹¹ Secondly, the Russian annexation of Crimea, which followed in March 2014, shook threat perceptions across Europe, incentivizing increased German engagement on the Eastern Flank. These changes are reflected in the Ministry of Defense's latest White Book on Security Policy and the Future of the German Armed Forces (White Book) from 2016. In a clear change of tone, the Ministry declared Russian behavior a threat to the European security order.

As a consequence of the Russian aggression, Germany moved away from advocating for outright partnership, although still highlighting the long-term strategic advantage of increased cooperation, once the preconditions for such cooperation are re-established. This means an end to Russian violations of international law on European soil.

¹⁰ *Zur Sicherheit Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Und Zur Lage Und Zukunft Der Bundeswehr*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975292/736102/64781348c12e4a80948ab1bdf25cf057/weissbuch-zur-sicherheitspolitik-2016-download-bmvg-data.pdf?download=1>, p. 27 [26.06.2020].

¹¹ C. Barzanje et al., *Perceptions of Germany in the Security of the Baltic Sea Region*, E. Vizgunova, A. Sprūds (eds), Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2018.

An overarching German objective today is to compel Russia to drop its interference in its “near abroad” and accept the European security structure. To achieve this, Berlin emphasizes a comprehensive policy mix, of which defense policy is only a part.¹² It follows a multi-pronged approach towards security on the Eastern Flank, i.e., increasing defense capabilities and seeking cooperation with Russia.

Different ministries highlight one of the two dimensions. While Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer cautions against the “real and urgent threat, emanating from Russia”,¹³ Foreign Minister Heiko Maas attempts to re-energize the relations with Russia via a New Ostpolitik while he views Germany as a “bridge between the East and West.”¹⁴ Both dimensions shall be elaborated briefly.

Increasing defensive capabilities on the Eastern Flank

International cooperation has become a hallmark of German foreign policy. Naturally, increased security efforts are to take place in multilateral contexts. Under the slogan “remaining transatlantic and becoming more European”,¹⁵ the

¹² *Zur Sicherheit Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Und Zur Lage Und Zukunft Der Bundeswehr*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975292/736102/64781348c12e4a80948ab1bdf25cf057/weissbuch-zur-sicherheitspolitik-2016-download-bmvg-data.pdf?download=1> [26.06.2020].

¹³ “A Conversation with German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer on Resilience”, Atlantic Council, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz5WFzwHNWA> [26.06.2020].

¹⁴ R. Romaniec, “Deutschland Profitiert Davon, Dass Es Europa Gut Geht. Interview Mit Heiko Maas”, *Deutsche Welle*, 18.06.2020, <https://www.dw.com/de/heiko-maas-deutschland-profitiert-davon-dass-es-europa-gut-geht/a-53852064> [26.06.2020].

¹⁵ “Ein Neuer Aufbruch Für Europa, Eine Neue Dynamik Für Deutschland, Ein Neuer Zusammenhalt Für Unser Land – Coalition Agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD”, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975226/847984/5b8bc23590d4cb2892b-31c987ad672b7/2018-03-14-koalitionsvertrag-data.pdf?download=1>, p. 144 [26.06.2020].

current coalition agreement foresees the enhancement of national and European capabilities and intensify cooperation. Germany has committed itself to approximate NATO's 2% commitment and has increased its defense budget faster than other Western European NATO members. The federal budget for defense grew by 26.5% between 2014 and 2019, reaching 43.2 billion Euros. By comparison, France's 8.8% and the UK's 7.7% budgets grew significantly slower during the same time.¹⁶ Germany also pledged to provide more leadership within the Alliance.¹⁷

At the same time, Germany prioritizes the strengthening of European capabilities within and outside NATO ("the European Pillar"). It actively promotes the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework for defensive integration within the EU. A closer look at the projects suggests active engagement between Germany and countries on the Eastern Flank. Of fifteen projects with German participation, eleven are joined by at least one of those countries. Besides this new security initiative, Germany sees particular merit in improving European synergies and, thus, inter-operability, research and development, procurement, standardization and certification.¹⁸ The list of German PESCO participations

¹⁶ "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013-2019)", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2019, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_11/20191129_pr-2019-123-en.pdf [26.06.2020].

¹⁷ *Zur Sicherheit Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Und Zur Lage Und Zukunft Der Bundeswehr*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975292/736102/64781348c12e4a80948ab1bdf25cf057/weissbuch-zur-sicherheitspolitik-2016-download-bmvg-data.pdf?download=1> [26.06.2020].

¹⁸ *Sicherheits- Und Verteidigungspolitik Der Ostsee-Anrainerstaaten Seit Der Russischen Annexion Der Krim Und Dem Ausbruch Des Konflikts In Der Ost-Ukraine*, Deutscher Bundestag, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/529926/14b33273c3a4eb4ef7afb09a59fab863/WD-2-064-17-pdf-data.pdf> [26.06.2020].

is notably light on hard military issues, reflecting Germany's doctrine of "military reluctance" (militärische Zurückhaltung).

In line with the government's integrated approach to foreign policy, a "European response" also encapsulates non-military deterrence. Germany quickly took on a leadership role in coordinating the sanctions regime against Russia in 2014.¹⁹ It also pursues the increase of resilience against hybrid warfare beyond the framework of the EU. It participates in the Northern Group, which brings together the Nordic and Baltic countries with the UK, Poland, the Netherlands, and Germany, to consult on security and defense matters informally. It has also changed its stance on the 3-Seas Initiative, endorsed by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in 2018, two years after its inception.²⁰ Despite limited success, Germany's attempt to revive the Weimar Triangle format with France and Poland is an evidence of the German efforts to promote common understanding and action. Moreover, as presented in the following section, Germany is actively engaged in bilateral defense cooperation with partners on the Eastern Flank.

Thus, the first dimension of German policy towards the Eastern Flank is conducted with a focus on concerted international action in NATO, the EU, and bilaterally. It foots on a comprehensive policy mix and is supported by a rapidly growing defense budget. This assertive strategy is moder-

¹⁹ M. Siddi, "A Contested Hegemon? Germany's Leadership in EU Relations with Russia", *German Politics*, 2020, vol. 1.

²⁰ H. Maas, "Bukarest, Berlin, Brüssel – Gemeinsam Für Ein Souveränes, Starkes Europa", <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/rede-des-bundesministers-des-auswaertigen-heiko-maas--1527072> [26.06.2020].

ated by its second dimension: maintaining a good relationship with Moscow.

Russia as an indispensable security actor

Despite its actions, Germany still views Russia as an indispensable partner in global security questions. Conditional on adherence to the current European security structure, it recognizes the potential of long-term strategic partnerships between itself, NATO, and Russia.²¹ It remains unwaveringly committed to the NATO-Russia Founding Act, including the therein contained commitment to limit “substantial combat forces” in the former Warsaw Pact countries, despite the changed security environment.²² Moreover, in spite of its obvious ineffectiveness, Germany also remains committed to the continuation of the Minsk Agreement, signaling its willingness to remain in dialogue.

In 2018, foreign Minister Maas announced a “New Ostpolitik”.²³ This announcement was heavily criticized in Poland as “Ostpolitik” traditionally meant a heavy focus on, and cooperative stance towards, Russia²⁴ instead of its Eastern neighbors and allies.

²¹ *Weißbuch Zur Sicherheitspolitik Und Zur Zukunft Der Bundeswehr*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975292/736102/64781348c12e4a80948ab1bdf25cf057/weissbuch-zur-sicherheitspolitik-2016-download-bmvg-data.pdf?download=1> [26.06.2020].

²² J. Dempsey, *NATO's Eastern Flank and Its Future Relationship With Russia*, Carnegie Europe, 23.11.2017, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/10/23/nato-s-eastern-flank-and-its-future-relationship-with-russia-pub-73499> [26.06.2020].

²³ H. Maas, “Bukarest, Berlin, Brüssel – Gemeinsam Für Ein Souveränes, Starkes Europa”, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/rede-des-bundesministers-des-auswaertigen-heiko-maas--1527072> [26.06.2020].

²⁴ T. Forsberg, “From Ostpolitik to ‘Frostpolitik’? Merkel, Putin and German Foreign Policy towards Russia”, *International Affairs*, 2016, vol. 92, p. 21.

In short, two competing narratives about Russia impact Germany's strategy towards the Eastern Flank. The first narrative recognizes Russia's policy as a challenge to European security, while the second treats Moscow as an indispensable partner. The former has been gaining ground since the war in Ukraine started in 2014 but the debate about the Russia's threat remains abstract for most Germans.²⁵ This puts the German threat perception at odds with its eastern NATO allies, such as Poland and the Baltics. This German disconnect is perhaps best epitomized in the failed analogy of Germany as a "bridge between East and West".²⁶ On the Eastern Flank lies not a river but NATO territory. Spanning a bridge from Berlin to Moscow would mean walking over the heads of Germany's allies.

Nonetheless, Russian aggression combined with the German commitment to multilateralism and its willingness to take the concerns of its Eastern neighbors seriously provide a background for Berlin's engagement on the Eastern Flank.

2. German engagement on the Eastern Flank

The subsequent part presents the German engagement on the Eastern Flank and pays special attention to the bilateral cooperation with Poland. We discuss it in two parts, with 2014 being the turning point.

²⁵ K. Liik, "Winning the Normative War With Russia. An EU-Russia Power Audit", European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/winning_the_normative_war_with_russia_an_eu_russia_power_audit 28 [26.06.2020].

²⁶ R. Romaniec, "Deutschland Profitiert Davon, Dass Es Europa Gut Geht. Interview Mit Heiko Maas", *Deutsche Welle*, 18.06.2020, <https://www.dw.com/de/heiko-maas-deutschland-profitiert-davon-dass-es-europa-gut-geht/a-53852064>. [26.06.2020].

2.1. Walking a tightrope between Russia and NATO

As presented above, the German political doctrine of keeping Russia as close as possible has put a shadow over the cooperation with Poland and other Eastern Flank countries. On the one hand, Berlin supported Poland's and the three Baltic states' attempts to join the Alliance. On the other hand, German policy-makers were careful to secure Russian acceptance of enlargement. The NATO-Russia Founding Act was essential in this respect, as it banned additional permanent NATO combat forces on the territories of the former Warsaw Pact states.

Together with the Polish accession to NATO, came a first indication of Germany's growing multilateral engagement in the region. In 1997, Berlin, together with Denmark and Poland, decided to establish a Multinational Corps North-east (MCN) with headquarters in Szczecin, Poland. In 2013, through the MCN, Germany participated for the first time in the Saber Strike²⁷ – an annual international exercise held from 2010 by the United States Army Europe and focused on the CEE. In the same year, Germany also participated in the Steadfast Jazz 2013. It was the first exercise in the region since the NATO accession of the Eastern European countries. It was perceived as a counterbalance to the Ladoga 2009, Zapad 2009 and 2013 exercises carried out by Russia (together with Belarus) which simulated attacks on Poland and the Baltic States.²⁸ The goal of Steadfast Jazz 2013 was to test the readiness of the NATO Response Force and the

²⁷ More on that, see: <https://www.eur.army.mil/SaberStrike/>

²⁸ E. Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Threat to Russia and the West*, Bloomsbury Paperbacks 2014.

interoperability of the troops. However, German involvement in the exercise was limited, contributing only 55 soldiers, while France sent 1,200 troops and Poland 1,040.²⁹ As Judy Dempsey claimed, Berlin's insignificant involvement revealed "a growing German indifference toward defense and security issues, whether they are related to NATO or the EU".³⁰

At the same time, the bilateral cooperation between Poland and Germany had been developing. It included joint exercises of all military branches, joint participation in EU and NATO missions, training of Polish military personnel in Germany, and handing over military equipment that was no longer used by Germany to Poland.³¹ One of the milestones of the bilateral cooperation was a comprehensive cooperation package that was agreed in 2011.³² It underlined shared interests and priorities in security policy and the willingness to strengthen both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Two initiatives were highlighted in particular: a reinforcement of the MNC by Poland and Germany and the Weimar Battlegroup launched in 2006 within the EU framework. Furthermore, both countries declared the enhancement of

²⁹ J. Dempsey, "What NATO's Steadfast Jazz Exercises Mean for Europe", Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe 2013.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ For more, see: A.-L. Kirch, M. Sus, "Polish-German Cooperation in Security and Defence: Falling Short of Potential or Doomed to Be Fragile?", in: E. Opiłowska, M. Sus (eds), *Poland and Germany in the European Union. The multi-dimensional dynamics of bilateral relations*, Routledge, forthcoming 2020.

³² "Programm Der Zusammenarbeit Anlässlich Des 20. Jahrestags Der Unterzeichnung Des Vertrags Zwischen Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Und Der Republik Polen Über Gute Nachbarschaft Und Freundschaftliche Zusammenarbeit", Federal Foreign Office & Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2011, <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/656922/418674/d348c75ba01986b448f9d76d40ce5392/2011-06-21-programm-deutsch-polnische-nachbarschaft-data.pdf> [6.06.2020].

bilateral cooperation within various military branches, such as land and naval forces, as well as aircrafts implemented in the form of detailed agreements between them that followed 2011.

2.2. Berlin's change of direction

As described, the German approach to the Eastern Flank started to evolve after Russia's invasion of the Donbas region and the annexation of Crimea. The 2014 Wales Summit witnessed the first decisions towards securing the Eastern Flank. Germany, Denmark, and Poland, among others, decided to raise the readiness level of the MNC headquarter to a High Readiness Force in order to enhance its capability. Also, the MNC should exercise command and control of the Alliance missions in the north-eastern region (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland), including the newly launched Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The VJTF comprised of up to 5,000 troops (land, air, maritime, and special forces) should be ready for deployment within 48 to 72 hours. It increased the size of the NATO response force from 25,000 to 40,000 personnel. In 2019, Germany overtook the command of this unit.

Yet, the main pillar of German engagement on the Eastern Flank is the leadership of a multinational battalion battlegroup of 1,200 troops from 10 countries sent to Lithuania in 2017 as a part of NATO's EFP. The decision to strengthen the defense capabilities on NATO's Eastern Flank was taken at the Warsaw Summit in 2016. The rotational EFP is a compromise between the expectations of the Alliance members from the region for a permanent NATO presence and those, like Germany, who argue against it. Nevertheless, the four

EFB battalions mark NATO's first deployment of combat forces east of the former German-German border. In 2019, then-German Defense Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, sustained the German commitment to the defense of NATO's Eastern flank and announced the investment of a total of 110 million euros until 2021 in improving military bases in Lithuania.³³

Another important element of the German engagement is participation in NATO exercises. NATO's Exercise Trident Juncture 2018 held in Norway and the Baltic Sea was the biggest in recent years, totaling 50,000 troops. Germany sent about 8,500 Bundeswehr soldiers and several vehicles to the exercise, including about 100 battle tanks and armored personnel carriers. This is significantly higher than what it sent to the Steadfast Jazz operation. Two years later, NATO put together the DEFENDER-Europe 2020 exercise, which was expected to be one of the biggest military exercises since the end of the Cold War. It was supposed to take place on the territory of Germany, Poland, and the Baltic States. As the host nation, Germany's role in the exercise should focus mainly on serving as a logistics hub for military units and proofing the German infrastructure needed to move NATO troops from the West to the Eastern Flank. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the size, scope, and the date of DEFENDER-Europe 2020 has been modified and is currently planned to take place in the second half of the year.³⁴

³³ A. Shalal, A. Sytas, "Germany Vows to Keep Troops in Lithuania, Invest More in Barracks", *Reuters*, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lithuania-nato/germany-vows-to-keep-troops-in-lithuania-invest-more-in-barracks-idUSKCN1PT1QN> [1.06.2020].

³⁴ U.S. European Command, "U.S. European Command Remains Ready and Responsive during the Pandemic", <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/04/08/u-s-eu>

Another aspect of German engagement on the Eastern Flank concerns the maritime defense of the Baltic Sea. Out of the eight Baltic Sea states, Germany has by far the strongest navy; in 2018, Germany had 15,900 active naval personnel, whereas Poland had 7,000, Finland 3,500, and Estonia only 400.³⁵ Berlin also outnumbers other Baltic Sea countries in terms of naval capabilities, such as the number of ships and soldiers.³⁶ This difference in power potential makes German leadership in effective regional coordination indispensable. Against this backdrop, Germany is involved in establishing the multinational Baltic Maritime Component Command (BMCC) in Rostock. The new facility is planned to achieve initial operating capability in 2023 and full operating capacity in 2025.³⁷ Once ready, it will fulfill three major functions: strategy, security, and warfighting. The BMCC should generate expertise on the Baltic Sea region that is missing within the Allied Maritime Command structure and, in case of a crisis, it would be able to provide a command for NATO maritime operations in the Baltic Sea. The BMCC will provide common maritime and air pictures, naval exercises, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities in the Baltic region. The German involvement in the BMCC indicates that Berlin takes the potential threat from Russia seriously. According to one of Germany's navy officers, "[t]he north Atlantic and the wider northern flank have returned to our attention as

ropean-command-remains-ready-and-responsive-during-the-pandemic/index.html [8.06.2020].

³⁵ H. Lange et al., "To the Seas Again. Maritime Defence and Deterrence in the Baltic Region", International Centre for Defence and Security, 2019, p. 24.

³⁶ Ibid., A-3-A-4.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

potential areas of operations. [...] The Baltic Sea has grown to a never-seen strategic significance in the past years.”³⁸ Moreover, in the mid-term perspective, the German navy plans to buy new equipment such as multipurpose combat ships as well as to modernize the German mine-warfare fleet.

Despite this growing involvement of Germany in providing security to Poland and the Eastern Flank in general, the ambiguity concerning Russia continues. For example, Berlin still wants to retain the NATO-Russia Council – suspended in early 2014 because of Crimea’s annexation by Russia and the latter’s intervention in eastern Ukraine, despite the mutual lack of trust between both parties. The Council was revived in April 2016 and has met several times since, although its role is declining. This ambiguity is partly rooted in divergent perceptions in Germany and Poland. As recent Pew opinion polls show, only 30% of Germans think that Russia constitutes a major threat to their security, whereas 65% of Poles feel this way.³⁹

Conclusions and recommendations for Poland

The above-presented analysis leads to three intertwined conclusions.

First, there is a lack of cross-party consensus over major foreign and security policy questions in Germany. The decisive topics include the volume of defense spending,

³⁸ S. Sprenger, “German Navy returns to treating the Baltic Sea as a potential theater of war”, *DefenseNews*, 23.01.2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/01/23/german-navy-returns-to-treating-the-baltic-sea-as-a-potential-theater-of-war/> [5.06.2020].

³⁹ J. Poushter, C. Huang, “Climate Change Still Seen as the Top Global Threat, but Cyber-attacks a Rising Concern”, Pew Research Center, 2019, p. 3.

the commitment to the transatlantic Alliance, European strategic autonomy, and Russia's relations. The German support for Nord Stream II and its unceasing commitment to the NATO-Russia Founding Act point to the still existing ambiguity in its relations with Moscow. It is reflected in the declarations of current Foreign Affairs Minister Heiko Maas. In 2019, he said that "we must not divide the Europeans on security matters. Germany will not tolerate any special arrangements, not vis-à-vis Moscow and not on any other matters. Our neighbors in Poland and the Baltic can trust us to take their security needs as seriously as we take our own. The Europe that we need cannot successfully take shape if they are not consulted."⁴⁰ One year later, his tone was different when he claimed that CEE countries transferred their memories of the Soviet Union to current Russia⁴¹ without mentioning the Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.

Another telling example of the lack of a coherent strategy is the ongoing debate about nuclear deterrence.⁴² The second-biggest opposition party, the Greens, calls for the German withdrawal from the American nuclear deterrence without considering its significance for the security

⁴⁰ H. Maas, "Sicherheit Für Europa. Wir Wollen Und Brauchen Die Nato", *Der Spiegel*, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/heiko-maas-sicherheit-fuer-europa-gastbeitrag-des-bundesaussenministers-a-1295735.html> [8.06.2020].

⁴¹ R. Romaniec, "Deutschland Profitiert Davon, Dass Es Europa Gut Geht. Interview Mit Heiko Maas", *Deutsche Welle*, 18.06.2020, <https://www.dw.com/de/heiko-maas-deutschland-profitiert-davon-dass-es-europa-gut-geht/a-53852064>. [19.06.2020].

⁴² P. Grün, A. Brzozowski, "SPD Leadership Reignites German Debate on US Nuclear Weapons", *EurActiv*, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/us-nuclear-weapons-german-social-democrats-play-down-recent-statement-but-demand-a-debate/> [9.06.2020].

of Germany's Eastern neighbors.⁴³ While the government still officially underlines German commitment to the transatlantic partnership nuclear deterrence, critical voices can also be heard among members of the governing Social Democratic Party.

A clear rift is also visible among the German public: 69% of Germans want more relations with Russia, whereas only 41% express a desire for more cooperation with the US. Also, 72% of Germans want more independence from the US in security issues, but only 43% want more defense spending.⁴⁴

Interlinked with this ambiguity is the second conclusion. Growing differences between Washington and Berlin undermine the credibility of NATO and the security of the Eastern Flank. German historically rooted and consistently highlighted commitment to multilateralism contrasts quite starkly with the Trump paradigm of inter-state strategic competition with China and Russia and his unilateral approach, e.g., towards Iran. Trump's reaction to anti-racism protests has been widely criticized in Germany and is seen as an indication of the decay of the foundation of shared values upon which NATO is built. At the same time, the main decisive issue remains Germany's flaunting of NATO's 2% spending target, free-riding, in the eyes of the US, on American security guarantees. The White House's recent announce-

⁴³ Der Abgeordneten Katja Keul and others, "Teilhabe Beenden – Atomwaffen Aus Deutschland Abziehen' 6", https://katja-keul.de/userspace/NS/katja_keul/Dokumente_2020/200618_Antrag_Nukleare_Teilhabe_beenden.pdf.

⁴⁴ J. Poushter, A. Castillo, "Americans and Germans Disagree on the State of Bilateral Relations, but Largely Align on Key International Issues", 2019, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2019/03/04/americans-and-germans-disagree-on-the-state-of-bilateral-relations-but-largely-align-on-key-international-issues/> [1.06.2020].

ment to withdraw 9,500 American troops from Germany,⁴⁵ has been presented by the President as a consequence of the insufficiency of the German defense spending.⁴⁶

Constant US-German disagreements between the two allies over key security issues will likely continue to present a major challenge, especially for Poland, even if the Democrats win the next election. As some experts argue, while the rhetoric might change, the essence will remain the same as it has been since before Trump; Germany must step up to its role as a major European power and enter the arena of hard security by, i.e., increasing the defense budget.⁴⁷ Both former presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama regularly expressed similar demands. One should not expect Joe Biden to change that.

In considering the first and second conclusions, a third one becomes clear: a likely way to secure increased German engagement on the Eastern Flank is via European co-operation. As presented, Russia remains a divisive topic and public support for increasing military spending is low. At the same time, the need to enhance the EU's strategic autonomy in order to be able to act without the US when necessary is acknowledged. Support for European integration remains high in Germany and has been increasing since

⁴⁵ D. M. Herszenhorn, "Trump Orders Large Withdrawal of US Forces from Germany", *Politico*, 6.06.2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-withdrawal-us-forces-from-germany-angela-merkel/?fbclid=IwAR3sKwwXjz2miv7-GBKsgNvzHqXP6TcvX-zDRKF9GlcPubN1oIOXANxP0780> [9.06.2020].

⁴⁶ See: Press Conference at the White House, 24.06.2020, <https://www.pscptv.w/1Mnxnd-VyRyWGO> [25.06.2020].

⁴⁷ C. Wilkie, "Trump is pushing NATO allies to spend more on defense. But so did Obama and Bush", *CNBC News*, 11.07.2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/11/obama-and-bush-also-pressed-nato-allies-to-spend-more-on-defense.html> [26.06.2020].

2015.⁴⁸ The German EU Council Presidency opens a political window, during which Berlin feels compelled to push European integration forward. The Presidency Program was recently presented by the German Defense Ministry. Among the top priorities are: the launch of the Strategic Compass; the strengthening of NATO – EU cooperation, especially within military mobility; further development of the European Medical Command; further enhancement of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability established in 2017; as well as the improvement of EU's cyber capabilities.⁴⁹ Polish security priorities seem to overlap to a great extent with these. This could be an opportunity to advance bilateral cooperation and to strengthen the Eastern Flank further. Especially the improvement of EU's cyber capabilities and a closer NATO-EU collaboration can contribute to the security of the Eastern Flank.

Derived from these conclusions, we propose three policy recommendations for the Polish foreign and security decision-makers:

1. To identify the differences among German political parties regarding security and defense issues and talk to all the political parties via different channels of communication, such as the German-Polish Parliamentary Friendship Group currently chaired by Manuel Sarazzin from Alliance 90/The Greens.⁵⁰ The present plurality of

⁴⁸ R. Wike and others, "European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism", 15.10.2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/10/Pew-Research-Center-Value-of-Europe-report-FINAL-UPDATED.pdf>.

⁴⁹ "Schwerpunkte der EU-Ratspräsidentschaft im BMVG", 24.06.2020, <https://www.bmvg.de/de/presse/schwerpunkte-eu-ratspraesidentschaft-bmvg-pressemitteilung-269800> [26.06.2020].

⁵⁰ For more, see: https://www.bundestag.de/en/europe/international/int_bez [26.06.2020].

opinions in Germany can function in favor of a Polish advantage if Poland manages to approach respective policy circles in a tailored way. This seems to be of particular importance considering the fact that Alliance 90/The Greens – the party that is postulating the withdrawal of Germany from the nuclear deterrence commitments – was the second largest party in Germany, which came in second in the European Parliament's 2019 election with its popularity growing. There is a possibility that it will form the next government and thus take on a more significant role in formulating a security and defense strategy. Its pro-European stance suggests that it would also intensify German efforts towards security and defense integration. Poland would be well-advised to be prepared for that with its own policy proposals.

2. Poland should focus on strengthening the European pillar of NATO. The US commitment to European security is uncertain. The pivot to Asia and the rise of geopolitical competition between the US and China can lead to the relocation of US resources to this part of the world. A bilateral relationship with the United States is of essence but does not replace the multilateral cooperation within the Alliance. Close cooperation with Germany, France, and other European member states is thus necessary. In fact, one of the key defense capabilities on the Eastern Flank, namely, the mobility and interoperability of forces, need close cooperation among European militaries.
3. As mentioned above, during the German Council Presidency, the EU will engage in the Strategic Compass – an analytical process to develop a common threat per-

ception among the EU member states. The active involvement of Poland is vital to upload Polish strategic interests on the EU agenda. It can be expected that Germany will play a very active part in shaping this process. A Polish-German bilateral coordination and communication over strategic interests will increase the likelihood of Polish interests being reflected in the final policy proposals. To that end, Poland could use already existing channels of communication, such as the intergovernmental consultations, the close cooperation between think tanks in Berlin and Warsaw, and the reflection group established by the chancelleries of the Presidents of Poland and Germany. The analysis has shown some salient differences between Poland and Germany in questions of security and defense, but also a willingness and a need to cooperate with each other. Thus, a Polish-German Council on Defense should be launched within the framework of the intergovernmental consultations. Such a Council exists between France and Germany and facilitates a common understanding and development of joint priorities.⁵¹ It could play a similar role between Poland and Germany.

⁵¹ U. Krotz, K. Wolf, "Franco-German Defence and Security Cooperation", 2018, in: H. Meijer, M. Wyss (eds), *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*, DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198790501.003.0026.

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