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GERMANY'S APPROACH TO SECURITY AND DEFENCE COOPERATION WITH POLAND BY THE MID-2020s

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This article examines the evolution of German-Polish cooperation in the political and military spheres. Methodologically, it draws on comparative analysis and the theoretical framework of armed forces development. Against the backdrop of heightened confrontation between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, Poland's strategic orientation has echoed that of West Germany during the Cold War. Poland has asserted its role as the largest NATO member state on the alliance's eastern border. It has significantly expanded its armed forces, and has become a key host of the large US military contingent. Poland expects to join the group of 'Western powers'. Concurrently, Germany has also strengthened its role within NATO. This has resulted in a complex dynamic of both cooperation and strategic rivalry between Germany and Poland. Germany has conceptually and practically emphasized the Weimar Triangle as a platform for representing EU interests, particularly in the post-Soviet space. In the 2010s, however, Poland suspended the activities of the Weimar Triangle and bilateral intergovernmental consultations in an effort to limit German influence. By the mid-2020s, both formats had been reactivated, and Germany had consolidated its position in relation to the Republic of Poland (RP). This shift was driven by Germany's growing influence in Eastern Europe beyond Poland and shared concerns about the weakening of Western influence in Ukraine and the broader post-Soviet region. Poland rapidly expanded its armed forces, becoming NATO's third-largest military by personnel in 2024. Germany has been more inert in its response, yet it has employed the Bundeswehr more rationally — particularly in the region considered a 'domestic' one — by establishing a ground presence both to its north and south. The article concludes by assessing the future trajectory of German—Polish security cooperation and the implications for the defence strategies of Russia and Belarus.

Keywords:

Germany, Poland, rising power, Weimar triangle, intergovernmental consultations, NATO, EU, armed forces, military expenditures, support of Ukraine

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Introduction

Historically, German—Polish relations have been marked by prolonged periods of alienation, interrupted by relatively brief phases of cooperation. A central factor shaping collective memory and bilateral dialogue is the legacy of World War II. Key historical events include the aggression of the Third Reich against Poland in 1939 and the imposition of a brutal occupation regime, which resulted in the loss of approximately 6.028 million lives — over 21 % of the country's population [1, p. 213]. Following the Yalta and Potsdam agreements of 1945, Poland significantly expanded its western and northern borders at the expense of territories formerly belonging to defeated Germany. During the Cold War and the broader East—West confrontation, relations between the newly established Federal Republic of Germany (1949) and the Republic of Poland remained complex and often strained. A symbolic turning point was on December 7, 1970, when West German Chancellor Willy Brandt famously knelt before the monument to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto — a gesture that became a milestone in German—Polish reconciliation.

Following the demise of the socialist bloc, official Warsaw demonstrated a strong interest in rapid rapprochement with the Euro-Atlantic community.¹ Germany assumed the role of one of Poland's key partners in facilitating this process. Two symbolic milestones in the reconfiguration of bilateral relations were the signing of the Treaty on Good Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation on June 17, 1991, which formalised a new *de jure* quality of relations, resolved the issue of recognition of Poland's western borders, and initiated a framework for inter-governmental consultations² — and the establishment of the Weimar Triangle (Germany, Poland, France) on August 28—29, 1991 [2, p. 123—124]. With the support of its western neighbour, Poland joined NATO in 1999 and acceded to the European Union in 2004. By the mid-2010s, German—Polish dialogue in the field of security and defence appeared to be well-developed. However, long-standing unresolved issues gradually became more pronounced, particularly due to an unofficial rivalry over leadership within the bilateral partnership. Notably, the Weimar Triangle ceased to function at the highest political level for over a decade after 2011,³ and the format of intergovernmental consultations was suspended for six years after 2018 [3, p. 63]. During this period, official Warsaw voiced criticism of Berlin both within the European Union — especially during the refugee crisis of 2015—2017 — and within NATO, particularly in the context of Donald Trump's first presidency [4, p. 20—21]. Poland also returned to con-

¹ In the article, the term “Euro-Atlantic community” refers to the collective of NATO and EU member states, as well as the institutions themselves.

² Vertrag zwischen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Republik Polen über gute Nachbarschaft und freundschaftliche Zusammenarbeit vom 17. Juni 1991. 17.06.1991, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2466170/57020a2e3064c4f8b8785dbd3aced4d6/deutschpolnischer-nachbarschaftsvertrag-data.pdf> (accessed 07.02.2025).

³ Pressestatements von Bundeskanzler Scholz, dem französischen Präsidenten Macron und dem polnischen Präsidenten Duda beim Treffen im Format des Weimarer Dreiecks am 8. Februar 2022 in Berlin. 08.02.2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/bregde/suche/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-dem-franzoesischen-praesidenten-macron-und-dem-polnischen-praesidenten-duda-beim-treffen-im-format-des-weimarer-dreiecks-am8-februar-2022-in-berlin-2003880> (accessed 07.02.2025).

tentious issues of historical memory, reviving demands for substantial reparations for the atrocities committed by the Third Reich [5, p. 49—50; 6]. Germany, while firmly opposing these demands, did so with careful diplomatic restraint [7].

By the mid-2020s, interstate relations began to show signs of renewed improvement. A key factor contributing to this shift was the launch of Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) on February 24, 2022.¹ However, despite the optimism declared by the countries, it is hardly possible to argue about the disappearance of most problems in the dialogue.

The article aims to examine the current characteristics of Germany's approach to cooperation with Poland in the field of security and defence. This involves addressing the following objectives: to analyse how modern Poland draws on the experience of West Germany during the Cold War in the context of the ongoing confrontation between the West and the Russian Federation; to explore Germany's conceptual framework regarding its policy towards Poland; to identify the specific features of political and diplomatic engagement, with particular attention to the functioning of negotiation formats; and to assess the potential and limitations of bilateral military cooperation, taking into account the structural and developmental specificities of both countries' armed forces. The analysis is conducted primarily on the basis of German official documents, given Germany's larger resource base and its highly consistent foreign policy.

The article employs comparative analysis (e.g., in examining the reasons for the interruption of bilateral negotiation mechanisms) and content analysis (focusing on the frequency and context of references to Poland in Germany's strategic and doctrinal documents). Methodologically, the study draws on the principles of the theory of armed forces development, which treats changes in organisational and personnel structures as indicators of shifting foreign policy priorities [8]. Particular attention is given to the evolution of the Bundeswehr's forward presence in Eastern Europe and the significant expansion of the Polish Armed Forces.

Scholars have traditionally devoted considerable attention to Germany's foreign policy, particularly its Polish dimension, focusing on bilateral cooperation within the frameworks of the EU and NATO [4; 5; 9—11], as well as on the functioning of diplomatic formats [7; 12]. However, much of the existing literature tends to concentrate on specific episodes or issues that, while important, are insufficient on their own to construct a comprehensive picture of interstate dialogue over an extended period. The military aspects of German-Polish cooperation remain underexplored and are generally addressed only in the context of Germany's contribution to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) [13].

In the study of Poland's foreign policy, particular emphasis has been placed on the transformations following the electoral victories of the right-wing conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) in the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections, as well as the election and re-election of its candidate, Andrzej Duda, as President of the Republic of Poland (2015; 2020) [14—17]. By contrast, the implications of the recent return to power of a coalition government led by Donald Tusk, with the liberal Civic Platform in a leading role — while PiS retains significant parliamentary representation and the presidency — have received comparatively limited scholarly attention [18]. Nonetheless, there is broad consensus among experts that the fundamental orientation of Poland's foreign and defence policy remains unchanged. Of particular analytical value are studies focused on Poland's activities and strategic positioning near the borders of the Kaliningrad region of

¹ Ibid.

the Russian Federation [19; 20], Belarus [21; 22], and Ukraine [23], as well as its contributions to regional integration in Eastern Europe [24] and participation in efforts to 'contain' the People's Republic of China [25].

West Germany's strategy as a guide for modern Poland

Since its creation (1949), the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) has consistently emphasised its organic and *de jure* permanent integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, inextricably linking its success with the strengthening and spread of the community's influence. This approach has become characteristic of the Republic of Poland since the 1990s, although the degree of its readiness to incorporate the values of liberal democracy was lower than that of the FRG [10, p. 10–17].

The community of 'Western democracies' with the leading role of the USA (and the UK) was formed during the Second World War. Of course, each expansion of NATO and the EU noticeably changed the composition of the Euro-Atlantic community, but did not break the foundations of the formed structure. It may thus be considered a fact that, by the time of their respective accessions to NATO—West Germany (FRG) in 1955 and Poland (RP) in 1999 — and especially during the periods in which each country began to pursue leadership ambitions, the foundations of their roles within the Euro-Atlantic community were already in place. In the case of the Federal Republic of Germany, the relatively late articulation of such aspirations can be attributed to its historical responsibility for the atrocities committed by the Third Reich. Consequently, within the Euro-Atlantic framework, both Germany and Poland represent uncommon examples of so-called 'rising powers'.

During the Cold War, the FRG gradually enhanced its political influence: from its founding in 1949 as a state under the tutelage of the 'Western powers' (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France), to its eventual *de facto* inclusion in their leadership circle, transforming the original triumvirate into a tetrarchy. This status was cemented following the resolution of the 'German question' in 1990 — primarily in favour of the FRG and the United States — which symbolised the emergence of a post-bipolar world order. In this new geopolitical context, Germany began to assert itself as a regional power. Notable markers of this transition include the decision to relocate the capital from Bonn to Berlin — evocative of imperial legacy — implemented mainly in 1998–1999, and Germany's participation in NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999. These developments marked the beginning of Germany's ongoing, though still incomplete, evolution toward becoming a state capable of exercising comprehensive political and military agency on the global stage.

The West—East confrontation provided the framework conditions for the successes achieved between 1949 and 1990. Official Bonn skillfully leveraged its strategic value to NATO allies, which was manifested in two main ways.

Firstly, West Germany was the largest member state in the forward part of the Alliance's area of responsibility, and was located right in its centre. Moreover, West Germany repeatedly, especially under Konrad Adenauer (1949–1963) and the 'early' Helmut Kohl (in the mid-1980s), took one of the toughest positions among Western countries concerning the USSR, and simultaneously carried out remilitarization [26, p. 193–211].

Secondly, during the 1970s and 1980s, Bonn deployed a substantial number of conventional forces — approximately 500,000 military personnel — repre-

senting over 20 % of the total strength of the United States Armed Forces at the time.¹ These forces, particularly the powerful ground troops, were well-equipped and maintained a high level of combat readiness. From the 1960s onward, the West German Bundeswehr became the largest contributor to NATO forces in the forward area of the Alliance's zone of responsibility and was fully integrated into NATO's military structure [26, p. 212–228; 27].

Concurrently, Germany hosted a significant allied military presence, which, before 1955, had the status of an occupying force. In the 1970s and 1980s, this presence numbered approximately 500,000 troops — comparable in size to the Bundeswehr — of whom roughly half belonged to the United States [27, p. 2]. Since the 1960s, official Bonn had also expressed interest in gaining indirect access to U.S. nuclear weapons stationed on West German territory [26].

In the contemporary confrontation between the Euro-Atlantic community and the Russian Federation, Poland's strategic behaviour closely mirrors that of the FRG during the Cold War. However, key differences remain: while West Germany at the time exercised only limited sovereignty, Poland enjoys full sovereign status. Nevertheless, both cases reflect a shared objective — the aspiration of national leadership in Warsaw to follow the FRG's example and secure a place among the ranks of the 'Western powers' [23].

Firstly, as a result of NATO's eastward expansion in its new forward zone of responsibility, Poland became the largest member state of the bloc. The approach of official Warsaw to 'deter' Russia (and Belarus) became one of the toughest.

Secondly, the Polish Armed Forces have followed a trajectory of accelerated militarisation since 2014, with the process gaining markedly greater speed and scale from 2021–2022 onwards. By 2023, the total strength of the Polish military exceeded 200,000 personnel, with plans underway to increase this number to 300,000.² When comparing these figures with those of the West German Bundeswehr, it is essential to consider the substantial difference in the size of national armed forces among NATO member states during the Cold War and the period from 2014 to 2023 — the latter being, on average, 1.8 times smaller [28].

In the current structure of the Polish Armed Forces, particular emphasis is placed on the ground forces. These have not only expanded rapidly but have also undergone extensive technical and technological modernisation, primarily through the procurement of advanced weaponry from the United States and South Korea [21, p. 39–98]. The Polish Armed Forces represent the largest value for NATO's potential in Eastern Europe. The region as a whole — and Poland in particular — has become a recipient of NATO partner deployments. By the mid-2020s, up to two U.S. Army brigade combat teams were stationed in Poland on a rotational basis (compared to only one in Germany), although the largest U.S. military presence in Europe continued to be in Germany [29, p. 70–77]. Following the example of West Germany, Poland has sought to establish particularly close and trust-based relations with the United States, securing support under both the Trump and Biden administrations [4; 14; 23].

¹ Based on: Financial and economic data relating to NATO Defence. M-DPC-2 (91) 105. 1991, NATO, Brussels, p. 8.

² Polish officer: it will take us a decade to reach 300 thousand military personnel. 15.08.2024, *Military review*, URL: <https://en.topwar.ru/248250-polskij-oficer-dlja-dosj-tizhenija-chislenosti-300-tysjach-voennosluzhaschih-nam-ponadobitsja-desjat-let.html> (accessed 07.02.2025).

However, two fundamental questions arise. First, to what extent can Poland's current strategic approach — modelled on West Germany's Cold War experience — be effective in principle? The resolution of the 'German question' in 1990, consistent with the vision of official Bonn, was made possible primarily through the 'preemptive concessions' of the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev. A repetition of such concessions by Russia, particularly if they run counter to its national interests, appears fundamentally unlikely. Second, to what extent is contemporary Germany prepared to support — or at least tolerate — the policies of another state (in this case, Poland) that aspires to challenge the Federal Republic's leadership in Europe and within NATO, drawing on strategies once employed by Germany itself? This question becomes even more pertinent given that Berlin has once again adopted deterrence-oriented policies toward the Russian Federation. The German government has declared its intention to build the largest conventional armed forces among European NATO members and has increased its focus on enhancing its military presence in Eastern Europe [30, p. 4–8].

The basics of Germany's approach to interaction with Poland. **Conceptual overview**

Germany's system of strategic planning documents in the field of security and defence is structured into several hierarchical levels. At the second level — the Defence Policy Guidelines (most recently updated in 2023¹) — and the third level — the Concept of the Bundeswehr (latest version from 2018²) — the focus is primarily on the priorities of the Federal Ministry of Defence and the assessment of available means for achieving these objectives. These documents, however, make virtually no mention of Germany's specific partners, including Poland.

In contrast, the most significant interstate relationships are addressed differently in first-level doctrinal documents. For example, the White Paper on Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr (2016) refers to Poland on four occasions, including in the context of developing a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union, particularly through the Weimar Triangle format.³ Poland is also mentioned in light of the joint staffing of NATO structures and formations.⁴ In this context, Poland is positioned alongside France (with which Germany operates a bilateral brigade) and the Netherlands (with which the Federal Republic of Germany maintains a bilateral corps, including its powerful 1st Armoured Division, which incorporates a Dutch mechanized brigade).⁵

Germany had initially sought to deepen cooperation with Poland through the NATO Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters (established in 1999 with the participation of Denmark). However, by the mid-2010s, the German combat units assigned to this structure had been either disbanded or redeployed, which significantly limited the depth of trilateral operational integration. The hopes placed by official Berlin on this format thus proved illusory. This, along with Germany's

¹ Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien 2023. 2023, Berlin, *BMVg*, 36 S.

² Die Konzeption der Bundeswehr. Ausgewählte Grundlinien der Gesamtkonzeption. 2018, Berlin, *BMVg*, 40 S.

³ Weissbuch zur Sicherheitspolitik und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr. 2016, Berlin, *Bundesregierung*, S. 74.

⁴ Ibid. S. 77, 80.

⁵ 1. Panzerdivision. 2025, *BMVg*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/heer/organisation/1-panzerdivision> (accessed 07.02.2025).

broader dissatisfaction with the nature of its bilateral interaction with the Republic of Poland, was reflected in the complete omission of Poland from the National Security Strategy of June 14, 2023 — a document that holds a precedent-setting status in German strategic planning. Notably, the strategy does highlight the increasing presence of the Bundeswehr in NATO's forward area of responsibility, signalling a shift in emphasis toward independent national contributions within the Alliance's eastern flank.¹ The process took place almost without reliance on any dialogue with the RP.

Official Berlin developed strategic planning documents for specific regions of the world (for example, the Arctic, 2013, 2019, 2024; the Indo-Pacific region, 2020), individual major states (primarily China in 2023). However, by 2025, such concepts had not been published either for Eastern Europe or specifically for Poland. First of all, this is due to the fact that Germany has traditionally avoided publishing separate doctrinal documents on relations with partners in the Euro-Atlantic community. In its interactions with partners, Germany primarily adhered to jointly adopted decisions within the framework of NATO (based on the outcomes of high-level summits and strategic concepts) and the European Union, reflecting its alignment with the community of Western democracies and its commitment to liberal values. Against the backdrop of the conclusion of Donald Trump's first presidential term — with its characteristic emphasis on unilateralism and pressure on Germany and the EU — official Berlin published the White Paper on Multilateralism in May 2021 [4; 5; 11]. Poland was not mentioned in the White Paper (2021),² unlike many of Germany's other partners. This is due to the active support of the PiS government for US pressure on Germany in the late 2010s.

The evolution of Germany's approach to cooperation with Poland is evident in the coalition agreements concluded by governing parties following each Bundestag election. In all such documents from 2013, 2018, and 2021, provisions concerning relations with Poland — presented within the broader framework of bilateral partnerships within the EU — were consistently placed in second position, immediately after references to dialogue with France³. Germany has repeatedly emphasised its recognition of historical responsibility for the atrocities committed by the Third Reich, for instance, by supporting the initiative to establish a World War II documentation centre under the auspices of the Bundestag.

However, this recognition did not imply any willingness to make concessions to the Republic of Poland on key strategic or political issues. In the coalition agreements of 2013, 2018, and 2021, Germany expressed a clear interest in cooperation primarily within the framework of the European Union (and, to a much lesser extent, through the OSCE), while references to NATO were almost entirely

¹ Wehrhaft. Resilient. Nachhaltig. Integrierte Sicherheit für Deutschland Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie. 2023, Berlin, *Bundesregierung*, S. 6.

² Gemeinsam für die Menschen. Weißbuch Multilateralismus der Bundesregierung. Berlin: *Bundesregierung*, 2021. 151 S.

³ Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. 18. Legislaturperiode. 2013, Berlin, *Bundestag*, S. 165, 167, 170 ; Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa. Eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland. Ein neuer Zusammenhalt für unser Land. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. 19. Legislaturperiode. 2018, Berlin, *Bundestag*, S. 9, 146 ; Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag 2021 — 2025 zwischen der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (SPD), BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN und den Freien Demokraten (FDP). 2021, Berlin, *Bundestag*, S. 126, 136.

absent. This is notable, given that NATO has been a key arena for competition between the two states, where the imbalance in capabilities and influence has been less pronounced in Berlin's favour. In seeking to strengthen dialogue with Poland, Germany has placed particular emphasis on the Weimar Triangle format involving France and signalling an intention to revitalise this mechanism following a period of stagnation. Before 2014, Germany had also engaged in a similar trilateral framework that included the Russian Federation.¹ Substantively, Germany also paid increased attention to the development of public relations with Poland and cooperation in the field of youth policy. By contrast, coordination in the sphere of security and defence was mentioned only in a limited manner, and, in principle, there were no references to cooperation in this area with regard to the western part of the post-Soviet space.² This recorded the presence of noticeable problems in the dialogue, the desire of the FRG to ensure freedom of manoeuvre at the doctrinal level, where disputes with Poland were most acute.

Overall, the 2013 coalition agreement reflected Berlin's confidence in the possibility of maintaining a stable dialogue with Warsaw without significant disruptions. The 2018 agreement acknowledged the need to overcome a noticeable deterioration in relations, while asserting Germany's seniority in bilateral interactions. In this context, the invocation of historical memory is noteworthy: the 2018 agreement recognised the important role played by Poland and Hungary — both key critics of Germany within the EU at the time — in resolving the 'German question' in 1990, the settlement of which had significantly strengthened the Federal Republic's position. By contrast, the 2021 agreement revealed a clear note of skepticism, reflecting the persistence and escalation of 'irritants' in the bilateral dialogue. The evolution of Berlin's perception of the Polish factor is also evidenced by the frequency of its mention in coalition agreements: five times in 2013, six times in 2018, and only twice in 2021.³

The political dialogue: evolution of content and institutional dimension

By the mid-2020s, the legal foundation of bilateral relations continued to rest on the Treaty on Good Neighborship and Friendly Cooperation, signed on 17 June 1991.⁴ In accordance with Paragraph 3 of the Treaty, a format of intergovernmental consultations was established, which convened regularly — approximately

¹ ¹ Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. 18. Legislaturperiode. 2013, Berlin, *Bundestag*, S. 165, 167, 170 ; Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa. Eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland. Ein neuer Zusammenhalt für unser Land. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. 19. Legislaturperiode. 2018, Berlin, *Bundestag*, S. 9, 146 ; Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag 2021 — 2025 zwischen der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (SPD), BÜNDNIS 90 / DIE GRÜNEN und den Freien Demokraten (FDP). 2021, Berlin, *Bundestag*, S. 126, 136.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vertrag zwischen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Republik Polen über gute Nachbarschaft und freundschaftliche Zusammenarbeit vom 17. Juni 1991. 17.06.1991, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2466170/57020a2e3064c4f8b8785dbd3aced4d6/deutsch-polnischer-nachbarschaftsvertrag-data.pdf> (accessed 07.02.2025).

every two years — until 2018 inclusive. Within two months of the treaty’s conclusion in 1991, the Weimar Triangle was formed at the level of foreign ministers. Over time, this format expanded to include meetings at the level of heads of state and government, as well as the presidents of the lower houses of national parliaments (the Bundestag, the Sejm, and the National Assembly) and the chairs of relevant parliamentary committees (Table 1). For all these formats, no fixed meeting schedule was established, allowing for flexible timing (unlike the intergovernmental consultations, which followed a more regular pattern). By the early 2010s, five high-level meetings had been held involving the presidents of Poland and France and the German Chancellor: in Poznań (1998), Nancy (1999, 2005), Hambach (2001), and Warsaw (2011).¹ During the preparation and accession of Poland to NATO (1999) and the EU (2004), the Weimar Triangle met at the highest level almost every year. Poland’s accession to the Euro-Atlantic community was accompanied by a declining interest in the Weimar Triangle format, as Warsaw increasingly prioritised cooperation with the United States and the United Kingdom over engagement with Germany and France. During the 2000s, meetings within the Triangle took place with intervals of four to six years, and following the 2011 summit, there was an eleven-year hiatus. Consultations at the level of foreign ministers were held more frequently — typically once every one to two years — but even this track experienced a significant interruption: after the meeting in September 2015, the next session did not occur until October 2020.² What is the reason for the indicated interruptions in the work of the Weimar Triangle and intergovernmental consultations (the latter since November 2018)?

Table 1

The functioning of the Weimar Triangle

Level of representation	Date of the first meeting	Date of last meeting (by 2025)
Ministers of Foreign Affairs	1991, August	2024, May
Heads of state and government	1993, September (non-official) 1998, February (official)	2024, March
Chairmen of the Committees of the Lower Houses of Parliament on Foreign Affairs, EU	2007, March	2024, November
Presidents of the lower houses of national parliaments	2010, May	2019, May

Source: Die wechselseitigen Beziehungen Deutschlands, Frankreichs und Polens seit Wegfall des „Eisernen Vorhangs“ unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der In-

¹ Die wechselseitigen Beziehungen Deutschlands, Frankreichs und Polens seit Wegfall des „Eisernen Vorhangs“ unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Initiative „Weimarer Dreieck“, *Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste*, WD 2-3000-075/16. 17.05.2016, S. 22, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/433608/974b65521ade6d93abca67ce5aec98d1/WD-2-075-16-pdf.pdf> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² Joint statement by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany and Poland) — Jean-Yves Le Drian, Heiko Maas and Zbigniew Rau. 15.11.2020, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/weimarer-dreieck-2405714> (accessed 07.02.2025).

itiative „Weimarer Dreieck“, *Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste*, WD 2-3000-075/16, 17.05.2016, S. 22–23, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/433608/974b65521ade6d93abca67ce5aec98d1/WD-2-075-16-pdf.pdf> (accessed 07.02.2025) ; Weimarer Dreieck: über 30 Jahre grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit zwischen Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen. 05.02.2024, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/zusammenarbeit-staaten/weimarer-dreieck-node> (accessed 07.02.2025) ; Trilaterales Treffen der EU-Ausschüsse im Format „Weimarer Dreieck“. 25.11.2024, *Bundestag*, URL: https://www.bundestag.de/ausschuesse/a21_eu/texte/20241124-weimarer-dreieck-1031168 (accessed 07.02.2025) ; Schäuble: Überwindung der Teilung Europas nicht gefährden. 13.05.2019, *Bundestag*, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw20-weimarer-dreieck-642244> (accessed 07.02.2025).

The interruption was preceded by the active involvement of the Weimar Triangle in supporting the Ukrainian opposition during the protests in Kyiv that began in late November 2013. This involvement included facilitating an agreement with President Viktor Yanukovych on February 21, 2014. However, the subsequent violent seizure of power on February 22, 2014, constituted a violation of the agreement. The document signed on February 21 was guaranteed by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the Foreign Minister of Germany and Radosław Sikorski, the Foreign Minister of Poland, and the head of the department of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹ The very fact that the agreements were broken the very next day did not cause any noticeable concern among the triumvirate of guarantor states.

In March 2014, Germany, Poland and France continued to use the format to support the new authorities in Ukraine, condemning the establishment of Russian sovereignty over the Crimean Peninsula.² Thus, the Weimar Triangle emerged as a significant expression of the position of EU member states — and of the Union itself — on one of the most important issues for ‘Western democracies’. This use of the format was fully aligned with Germany’s strategic guidelines and objectives in its dialogue with Poland.

However, against the background of the armed conflict in the then eastern Ukraine, the positions of official Berlin and Warsaw began to differ noticeably. The consensus remained on long-term priorities — to ensure Ukraine’s rapprochement with the Euro-Atlantic community, to maximally spread its influence in the post-Soviet space. The difference manifested itself in the strategies (partly) and tactics for achieving these goals.

In a situation where the new Ukrainian authorities were unable to suppress resistance in the People’s Republic of Donbass and People’s Republic of Lugansk by force, the German-French tandem decided to go for demonstratively forced interaction with the Russian Federation [31]. As practice showed, and then an inter-

¹ Die wechselseitigen Beziehungen Deutschlands, Frankreichs und Polens seit Wegfall des „Eisernen Vorhangs“ unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Initiative „Weimarer Dreieck“, *Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste*, WD 2-3000-075/16. 17.05.2016, S. 25, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/433608/974b65521ade6d93abca67ce5aec98d1/WD-2-075-16-pdf.pdf> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² Joint Statement on Ukraine of the Weimar Triangle Foreign Ministers Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Germany), Laurent Fabius (France), and Radosław Sikorski (Poland) in Weimar. 31.03.2014, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/140331-gemeinsame-erklarung-zur-ukraine-261272> (accessed 07.02.2025).

view with Angela Merkel after her resignation,¹ official Berlin and Paris did not advocate for a settlement aimed at fully eliminating the root causes of the conflict through non-military means. Instead, they pursued a strategy of regulation, maintaining the conflict at a controlled, albeit non-zero, level of violence, which was inherently unsustainable in the long term. This approach allowed official Kyiv time to prepare for a forceful resolution of the conflict. However, such a strategy necessitated considerable flexibility in relations with the Russian Federation as a systemic adversary — an approach that was not supported by the authorities in Warsaw.

For this reason, Germany and France, without the third party of the Weimar format, established the 'Normandy Four' (with the participation of Russia and the new authorities of Ukraine) on June 6, 2014. Subsequently, the two Western European powers refused to satisfy Poland's requests to include it in the negotiating format.² The extremely tough anti-Russian position of Poland inevitably made the already difficult work in the Normandy format much more difficult. If Germany used this platform to be forced to interact with the Russian Federation, then the Weimar Triangle was used to increase pressure on Russia through the EU. This scheme of using platforms strengthened Germany's position as the senior party in the dialogue with Poland. For it, this entailed tangible costs: due to its non-participation in the Normandy Four, Poland was partially removed from determining the West's strategic line on Ukraine. This was most clearly demonstrated during the signing of the Minsk-2 agreements on February 12, 2015, for which Germany and France assumed the role of guarantors [31].

Official Warsaw began to respond with particular intensity to the evolving political landscape following the victory of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in the parliamentary elections of October 2015. The new government initiated steps to suspend the activities of the Weimar format, aiming to exert pressure on Germany. Amid the crisis of mass, uncontrolled migration to the European Union between 2015 and 2017, Polish authorities sharply criticized Chancellor Angela Merkel for her adherence to the 'open-door' policy, leveraging the platform of the Visegrád Group (V4 — Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic) to articulate their position [10; 11]. In the late 2010s, attempts by Germany to strengthen ties with the V4 were met with resistance from official Warsaw and Budapest. Nevertheless, Berlin succeeded in improving bilateral relations with the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The PiS government sought to assert a leadership role in the dialogue with Germany during the 15th round of intergovernmental consultations, held in Warsaw on 2 November 2018 and symbolically aligned with the centenary of Poland's restoration as an independent state on parts of the former territory of the Second Reich. During the negotiations, the Polish delegation — which included both government representatives and PiS party officials — raised the issue of

¹ Angela Merkel: Hatten Sie gedacht, ich komme mit Pferdeschwanz? 07.12.2022, *Die Zeit*, URL: <https://www.zeit.de/2022/51/angela-merkel-russland-fluechtlingskrise-bundeskanzler> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² Die wechselseitigen Beziehungen Deutschlands, Frankreichs und Polens seit Wegfall des „Eisernen Vorhangs“ unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Initiative „Weimarer Dreieck“, *Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste*, WD 2-3000-075/16. 17.05.2016, S. 25, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/433608/974b65521ade6d93abca67ce5aec98d1/WD-2-075-16-pdf.pdf> (accessed 07.02.2025).

reparations from Germany for the crimes of the Second World War. This demand was firmly rejected by the Federal Republic of Germany [3, p. 63; 5]. As a result, the intergovernmental consultations were subsequently suspended.

In the first half of the 2020s, the activities of both formats were gradually resumed. In October 2020, the Weimar Triangle was reactivated at the level of foreign ministers, followed by a meeting of heads of state and government in February 2022. Subsequently, in June 2024, new intergovernmental consultations between Germany and Poland took place (Table 1). The trilateral platform resumed its functions first, followed by the bilateral format. The interval between each pair of events was approximately 1.5 to 2 years, indicating a deliberate and gradual process in which the parties carefully anticipated and subsequently evaluated the implications of each stage.

What accounts for the resumption of these formats? The change in government, particularly in the Republic of Poland, does not appear to have been the decisive factor. The Weimar Triangle reconvened at senior and highest levels well before the Polish parliamentary elections of September 2023, which led to the formation of a coalition government headed by Donald Tusk, representing the Civic Platform (since December 13, 2023). Preparations for the 16th round of intergovernmental consultations had also begun prior to the transition of power. Moreover, the influence of the Law and Justice Party on foreign policy has remained considerable, both indirectly — as the largest faction in the Sejm — and directly, through President Andrzej Duda.

The recognition of Joe Biden from the Democratic Party as the winner of the US presidential election on November 3, 2020, is an important factor, although this happened a little later than the restart of the Triangle at the level of foreign ministers. Official Warsaw regarded the United States (and partly Great Britain) as its most important ally, assigning Germany a secondary importance.

The events of the 2000s — 2010s showed that cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the United States developed most dynamically under Republican administrations. The most illustrative is the advanced bilateral cooperation during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017—2021). It was based, among other things, on the proximity of values. Like the 45th President of the United States, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) represented right-wing conservative forces and adopted a cautious stance toward liberal values, particularly in matters concerning the individual, family, and society [4, p. 20—21; 17]. One area of alignment between PiS and the U.S. administration at the time was the coordination of pressure on Germany, especially with the aim of compelling it to significantly increase military spending [11]. However, by the late 2010s, official Berlin had demonstrated its capacity to resist pressure from both the Republic of Poland and the United States, effectively distinguishing its opposition to each in both temporal and functional terms. While Germany did increase its defence expenditures, it did so according to a timeline aligned with its own strategic preferences rather than in response to external demands from Washington and Warsaw. German diplomacy also worked to prevent Poland from negotiating a separate agreement with the United Kingdom on Brexit, distinct from the collective position of the other EU member states [32]. As a result, the final terms proved more favourable to the European Union than to London, and the overall impact of Brexit was less detrimental than initially anticipated.

The Biden administration (2021—2025) generally had a favourable effect on German—Polish relations, contributing to a more constructive diplomatic climate. Under the 46th president, the United States continued to actively encourage

continental European partners to significantly increase the burden of ‘deterrence’ of the Russian Federation, but did so not through harsh pressure, but in carefully calibrated forms [28; 29]. This trend, along with Germany’s gradually but steadily increasing willingness to expand its contribution and adopt a tougher stance in the confrontation with the Russian Federation, created the preconditions for overcoming the downturn in German–Polish dialogue.

Particularly significant were the large-scale transformations taking place in the western part of the post-Soviet space, notably the growing risk of a halt in the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic community’s influence in the region. While official Warsaw was actively strengthening its armed forces, this effort alone proved insufficient to prevent setbacks in achieving strategic objectives regarding Belarus and Ukraine. Consequently, the Republic of Poland found itself increasingly reliant on the support of its partners, including Germany. This renewed interest in cooperation was largely reciprocal, driven by similar underlying concerns, albeit to a lesser extent on the German side.

The overall strengthening of Germany’s position within the forward area of NATO’s zone of responsibility was also a significant factor contributing to the resumption of cooperation formats. Notably, Berlin achieved this increased influence without substantial support from Poland. Germany’s most prominent successes occurred in its relations with Vilnius and the Baltic States more broadly. In contrast to formats involving Poland, the ‘B3 + 1’ mechanism (comprising the three Baltic republics and Germany), which was launched in 1994, continued to function regularly throughout the latter half of the 2010s. Since 2017, German Bundeswehr units have been stationed in Lithuania, serving as the core of NATO’s multinational battalion tactical group (BTG) deployed under the Forward Presence initiative.

Official Berlin effectively leveraged this military engagement by elevating the ‘B3 + 1’ dialogue: starting in 2018, meetings began to take place not only at the foreign minister level (on an annual basis) but also, albeit irregularly, at the level of heads of state and government [33, p. 70–75]. Germany’s increasing influence in Lithuania was particularly salient from Poland’s perspective, given the historical precedent of Polish leadership in relations with its eastern neighbour. From the late 14th century onward, the Polish Crown gradually asserted dominance over the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, culminating in their formal union as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (a federation of ‘principality’ and ‘crown’, with the latter prevailing) from 1569 to 1795. During the interwar period (1920–1939), the re-established Polish state annexed extensive Lithuanian territories, including the city of Vilnius.

In this context, Germany’s provision of concrete security and defence guarantees to Lithuania — particularly within the NATO framework — was a powerful demonstration of influence that did not go unnoticed in Warsaw. This development contributed to Poland’s growing readiness to resume structured formats of cooperation with Germany. In general, the tactics of suspending the work of the Weimar Triangle and intergovernmental consultations chosen by Poland in the second half of the 2010s did not bring the expected results in terms of pressure on Germany. This was also facilitated by holding bilateral negotiations at the highest and high levels outside the formats, which means the most common form of interstate dialogue. These contacts were usually annual, and in terms of the breadth of the agenda and significance, they were often noticeably inferior to meetings on the sidelines of the platforms in question. Overall, Germany succeeded in consolidating its position within the Euro-Atlantic community, and most notably

within the region traditionally considered Poland's immediate sphere of interest. This was achieved despite a noticeable decline in bilateral dialogue with the Republic of Poland and without demonstrating a willingness to offer concessions to the latter.

The Weimar Format meeting at the foreign ministerial level in October 2020 occurred in the context of the pro-Western opposition in Belarus failing to seize power following the presidential elections held on August 9, 2020.

The Weimar Triangle negotiations with the participation of heads of state and government took place on 8 February 2022, ahead of the start of the SMO. The venue for the consultations was Berlin, which, together with the very fact of their resumption, reflected the strengthening of Germany's position with respect to the Republic of Poland. By this time, the Normandy format had ceased to work, and the likelihood of implementing 'Minsk-2' was close to zero. Chancellor Olaf Scholz effectively acknowledged these provisions during his visit to Russia on 15 February 2022.¹ Consequently, significant obstacles in German-Polish relations were resolved. More importantly, the leadership of the Federal Republic of Germany demonstrated a readiness to adopt a markedly firmer stance to deter the Russian Federation, including through military means. This position was communicated to the authorities of the Republic of Poland during the Weimar Format negotiations on February 8, 2022. Within merely three days of the commencement of the Special Military Operation, official Berlin initiated arms supplies to Ukraine and announced the establishment of a special fund amounting to 100 billion euros to support the Bundeswehr's needs.² The speed and scale of the decisions taken by Germany indicated that the supplies had been planned in advance. On April 28, 2022, the Bundestag formally lifted the ban on supplying weapons and military equipment to Ukraine, thereby legalizing the ongoing practice of deliveries in increasing volumes,³ expanding the range of equipment, and enhancing the firepower and range of the transferred systems. In June 2022, Germany, ahead of all other NATO member states, initiated the transformation of the multinational battalion tactical group of Forward Presence, led by the Bundeswehr, into a brigade.⁴

The sharp increase in Germany's military involvement in the confrontation with the Russian Federation, especially under the auspices of the Alliance, was both beneficial and inconvenient for Poland. Germany's plans to substantially expand its military capabilities and adopt a more assertive posture in Eastern Europe have not only bolstered Poland's security and defence but also reignited interstate rivalry. A key manifestation of this competition is Poland's ambition not only to outpace Germany in military modernisation but also to surpass it in

¹ Press conference following Russian-German negotiations. 15.02.2022, *Administration of the President of the Russian Federation*, URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67774> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz. 27.02.2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356> (accessed 07.02.2025).

³ Namentliche Abstimmung. Frieden und Freiheit in Europa verteidigen — Umfassende Unterstützung für die Ukraine. Plenarprotokoll 20/31. 28.04.2022, *Deutscher Bundestag*, 20, Wahlperiode, Stenografischer Bericht 31. Sitzung, S. 2743A—2745D.

⁴ „Russland darf und wird diesen Krieg nicht gewinnen”. 07.06.2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/bundeskanzler-in-litauen-2047754> (accessed 07.02.2025).

the strength of its ground forces. Moreover, in 2022–2023, a certain division of military and practical responsibilities began to emerge. Germany, traditionally ‘dissolving’ its military efforts in multilateral ones, claimed the role of the leading assembler and leader (the so-called ‘framework nation’) for a wide range of NATO multilateral groups. First of all, the Bundeswehr was deployed as part of formations intended to advance from the rear of the Alliance’s zone of responsibility to its forward areas in the event of a crisis. These included the NATO Response Force and, starting from July 1, 2024, the Allied Reaction Force, which was established on its basis. The contingents of NATO Forward Presence, especially the brigade being formed (by 2027) in Lithuania, were considered by official Berlin as reinforced vanguards.¹ Official Warsaw sought to leave the majority of its armed forces under national command, participated to a limited extent in the staffing of multinational groups, but showed a noticeable interest in their use in Eastern Europe. Until the early 2020s, the irritants for Poland included Germany’s willingness to agree only to a rotational deployment of NATO Forward Presence. From 2022–2023, Berlin changed its approach, especially when using the Bundeswehr: the brigade being created in Lithuania (45th Armoured) should not only consist almost entirely of German units, but also be stationed on a permanent basis.²

The Weimar Format summit on 8 February 2022 was one of many reasons why Poland joined the leading ‘Western democracies’ when they were discussing the situation in Ukraine in February–April 2022. However, the informal group was not institutionalised,³ and since May 2022, the meetings have ceased. Instead, the Ramstein format emerged with the participation of all NATO and EU member states [34, p. 8, 32–35]. Poland achieved only short-term success, but overall did not make any significant progress in its intention to join the group of ‘Western powers’. On the contrary, Germany strengthened its position in it by continuing to show intransigence on the most important contentious issues with the Republic of Poland: Berlin made it clear that it considered the issue of reparations closed forever. Germany strengthened its noticeable influence in the Baltic countries: on May 6, 2024, the next negotiations in the ‘B3 + 1’ format were held at the level of heads of state and government.⁴ The listed trends set the changed framework conditions for interstate dialogue with the Republic of Poland.

New negotiations of the heads of state and government of the Weimar Triangle took place on June 12, 2023, in Paris and on March 15, 2024, in Berlin. The annual frequency of meetings, as well as the fact that they were held in Germany in both 2022 and 2024, reflected the trend of Germany strengthening its position

¹ Bundeswehr in Litauen: In großen Schritten zur deutschen Kampfbrigade. 2025, *BMVg*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/aktuelles/meldungen/bundeswehr-litauen-grosse-schritte-deutsche-kampfbrigade> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² Ibid.

³ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz zur Telefonschaltkonferenz am 19. April 2022. 19.04.2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-zur-telefonschaltkonferenz-am-19-april-2022-2026400> (accessed 07.02.2025).

⁴ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz, Ministerpräsidentin Siliņa, Ministerpräsidentin Kallas und Ministerpräsidentin Šimonytė am 6. Mai 2024 in Riga. 06.05.2024, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-ministerpraesidentin-silina-ministerpraesidentin-kallas-und-ministerpraesidentin-simonyte-am-6-mai-2024-2277440> (accessed 07.02.2025).

in the dialogue with the Republic of Poland. The substantive focus of the negotiations, especially in 2024, was on coordinating military assistance for Ukraine (supplies of weapons and military equipment, personnel training)¹ in the context of the ongoing offensive of the Russian Armed Forces on the fortified areas of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the western part of the People's Republic of Donbass. Germany once again, as in 2014–2015, used the Weimar format as an expression of the EU's interests in the western part of the post-Soviet space.

On July 2, 2024, the 16th intergovernmental consultations took place. As with the previous round (the 15th, held in 2018), the meeting was held in Warsaw, which constituted a violation of the established protocol of alternating host countries. However, this deviation was advantageous not so much for the Republic of Poland as for Germany: having suspended the consultations for an extended period, Poland demonstratively agreed to their resumption, ultimately failing to assert seniority in the dialogue. At the 16th intergovernmental consultations, the parties repeatedly noted the high level of trust, thereby indirectly indicating that the decline in relations has been largely overcome. Mutually welcoming the significant contribution to supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the states agreed on the need to further expand the EU as an association; the willingness to cooperate along NATO lines has noticeably increased.²

The listed provisions were manifested in the very fact of the adoption of a bilateral action plan (which was an innovation for the practice of German-Polish consultations) and the content of the document. Security and defence issues were singled out in a separate section. The parties indicated their readiness to mutually take into account the interests and support when discussing the transformation of the UN, especially its Security Council.³ Since the 1990s, Germany has made unsuccessful attempts to become a permanent member, but until the early 2020s, Poland took a *de facto* negative position on this issue.

Germany and Poland agreed to deepen cooperation in the field of engineering and naval forces (where Germany possessed considerable potential), as well as to establish coordination between territorial defence brigades and regional territorial commands. In this regard, Poland had created a large reserve, while its neighbour was only beginning to recreate the network of these formations and headquarters that had been disbanded after the Cold War. It is logical that in military-technical terms, the focus was on modernising the German-made Leopard tanks that the Polish Army had. Moreover, according to Poland's plans, the most common tanks in its armed forces in the future will be the South Korean Black Panthers and the US Abrams, while the number of Leopards will be significantly reduced [21, p. 39–98].

¹ Pressestatements von Bundeskanzler Scholz, Präsident Macron und Ministerpräsident Tusk beim Treffen der Staats- und Regierungschefs im Format des Weimarer Dreiecks am 15. März 2024 in Berlin. 15.03.2024, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-praesident-macron-und-ministerpraesident-tusk-beim-treffen-der-staats-und-regierungschefs-im-format-des-weimarer-dreiecks-am-15-maerz-2024-2265726> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² „Gute Nachbarn, enge Partner und verlässliche Freunde“. 02.07.2024, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/deutsch-polnische-regierungskonsultationen-2024-2295270> (accessed 07.02.2025).

³ Deutsch-Polnischer Aktionsplan. 02.07.2024, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/992814/2295276/b5e9e128f9d0909349fd9a57f04c-be69/2024-07-02-deu-pol-aktionsplan-de-data.pdf?download=1> (accessed 07.02.2025).

Opportunities and challenges of military cooperation

Among NATO member states, the United States (1,338 thousand in 2014 and 1,317 thousand in 2022) and Turkey (427 thousand and 456 thousand personnel, respectively) have traditionally had the largest armed forces.¹ In the context of confrontation with the Russian Federation, the third position has acquired considerable practical and image significance — namely, the status of the state capable of claiming and maintaining it. Until 2022, this position was held by France; however, its Armed Forces did not expand, maintaining a stable personnel level of approximately 207,000–208,000 service members since 2014.² Since 2022, Germany has been openly declaring its ambition to claim this position, while Poland has been de facto competing for it.

In the late 2010s, Germany was somewhat ahead of Poland in terms of publishing plans for strengthening its armed forces, particularly the land forces, which were assigned an increasingly prominent role in NATO's strategic planning and operational concepts. Both countries outlined similar ambitions: to double the number of divisions (from three to six) and to significantly expand the number of brigades, especially among combat troops. However, the pace at which each country moved toward achieving these objectives differed markedly. By 2025, Poland had already deployed three full divisions, was actively staffing a fourth, had begun creating a fifth, and was preparing to deploy a sixth. All existing divisions (11th Armoured, 12th Mechanized, 16th Mechanized) had 3 brigades each, and the new ones (1st Polish Legions and 18th Mechanized) had 4 brigades each. Taking into account the 2 airborne brigades, the RP had 22 military brigades [35].

By 2025, Germany had not created a single new brigade or division. The Bundeswehr continued to consist of the 1st Panzer Division and the 10th Panzer Division, which together comprised approximately 5.5 tank and mechanized infantry brigades. In addition, the Rapid Forces Division remained operational, comprising two brigades: one airborne and one specializing in mountain infantry.³ Even considering that a Bundeswehr brigade (excluding the airborne brigade) typically comprises 5–6 battalions, while a brigade in the Polish Armed Forces consists of 3–4 battalions, the difference remains significant [35]. Germany plans to establish one regular brigade in Lithuania by 2027, and, regarding the creation of a new division, German authorities are contemplating relying on reserve servicemen.

Between 2014 and 2023, the Polish Armed Forces expanded by 108 %, whereas the Bundeswehr increased by only 5 % by 2022 (Table 2). Consequently, by 2024, Poland ranked third among NATO member states in terms of personnel numbers. In the medium term, Germany has limited prospects of closing this gap, let alone surpassing Poland. Of the total number of armed forces of NATO member states excluding Canada and the United States, the Bundeswehr accounted for 9.6 % in 2022, while the Polish Army accounted for 9.3 %. In 2024, based on preliminary data, this will be 9 % and over 10.5 % (Table 2). Of the total increase in the armed forces of European member states and Turkey in 2014–2024 (216 thousand military personnel), more than half (117 thousand personnel) came from Poland.

¹ Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014–2024). 2024, Brussels, NATO, P. 13.

² Ibid.

³ Deutsches Heer. 2025, *BMVg*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/heer> (accessed 07.02.2025).

Table 2

**Dynamics of the number of German and Polish armed forces,
thousands, military personnel**

Category / year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*	2024*
Germany	178.8	177.2	177.9	179.8	181.5	183.8	183.9	183.9	183.2	181.7	185.6
Poland	99.0	98.9	101.6	105.3	109.5	113.1	116.2	166.8	176.0	206.5	216.1
NATO without USA.											
Canada	1825	1741	1718	1787	1823	1812	1827	1900	1901	1967	2041
NATO as the whole	3229	3125	3090	3163	3210	3213	3243	3317	3285	3320	3418

Source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014—2024). 2024, Brussels, NATO, P. 13.

Note: * For 2023 and 2024, the data is preliminary.

At the same time, the Republic of Poland has been rapidly increasing its defence spending. Poland's defence spending accounted for approximately or slightly above 2 % of GDP in the mid-2010s to early 2020s, and is projected to exceed 4 % by 2025. Warsaw was noticeably ahead of the absolute majority of NATO partners, especially Germany: its indicator at the end of the 2010s was at 1.5 %, and in 2024 it should be above 2 % for the first time (Table 3).

Table 3

Military spending as a share of GDP for Germany and Poland, %

Category / year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*	2024*
Germany	1.19	1.19	1.20	1.23	1.25	1.35	1.51	1.45	1.51	1.64	2.12
Poland	1.88	2.23	2.00	1.89	2.02	1.99	2.23	2.22	2.23	3.26	4.12
NATO without USA											
	1.42	1.43	1.44	1.48	1.51	1.54	1.72	1.66	1.66	1.78	2.02
NATO as the whole	2.58	2.48	2.48	2.39	2.40	2.52	2.69	2.63	2.51	2.53	2.71

Source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014—2024). 2024, Brussels, NATO, P. 9.

Note: * For 2023 and 2024, the data is preliminary.

Poland's substantial increase in annual military spending between 2014 and 2024—amounting to an additional 25 billion euros—elevated its position among NATO member states from 10th to 5th place by 2025. This rise allowed Poland to surpass the Netherlands, Spain, Canada, Italy, and Turkey, positioning it close to the core group of leading Western powers.

Nonetheless, Germany's military budget growth during 2014—2022 was even more pronounced, with an increase exceeding 50 billion dollars, twice the amount

of Poland's rise (Table 6). Consequently, by 2025, Germany secured second place after the United States in terms of specialized military expenditures. This significant budgetary advantage underscores Germany's superior volume and resource capacity. The approach toward annual military spending near 100 billion dollars provides the necessary conditions for comprehensive qualitative and quantitative modernization of the Bundeswehr, enabling it to address and overcome multiple challenges in enhancing its combat readiness.

Table 4

**Military expenditures of Germany and Poland: volumes (USD)
and position (descending) in the NATO countries' rating, mln**

Year	Germany	Poland
2014	46 176 (IV place)	10 107 (X place)
2017	45 470 (IV place)	9940 (IX place)
2021	62 054 (III place)	15 099 (VIII place)
2022	61 405 (III place)	15 338 (VIII place)
2024*	97 686 (II place)	34 975 (V place)

Source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014–2024). 2024, Brussels, NATO, P. 8.

Note: * For 2024, the data is preliminary.

By the mid-2020s, Poland had gained a very high speed in building up its military power. However, this process also creates certain challenges for the country. Firstly, it began to approach the objective, without the condition of transition to the mobilization model of development, the limits of growth of various parameters of the Armed Forces. The West German Bundeswehr at the peak of its capabilities during the Cold War accounted for 0.8 % of the total population of the country (about 500 thousand military personnel and 63 million people, respectively) [26, p. 193–228]. The same indicator appears applicable to the modern Republic of Poland: with a population of approximately 38 million, 0.8 % corresponds to about 300,000 military personnel. This figure aligns precisely with the benchmark target set by official Warsaw for its armed forces. The question is what it will do when it reaches this level, not being objectively capable of increasing it further, while other NATO member countries (primarily Germany) will, albeit slowly, approach it. Official Warsaw may advocate not only for an increase in the U.S. military presence to complement its sizable conventional forces, but also for the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons on Polish territory. This would effectively grant Poland indirect access to nuclear capabilities — akin to the arrangement with West Germany during the Cold War — which would significantly raise regional tensions and pose serious risks to strategic stability.

Secondly, by the mid-2020s, a similar challenge emerges for the Republic of Poland in the sphere of military spending: sustaining a level of 4 % of GDP or higher is likely to exert a noticeable distorting effect on the national economy. In contrast, the inertia characteristic of the German 'military machine' carries not only disadvantages, such as slower responsiveness, but also certain advantages — primarily the ability to leverage Germany's significantly larger resource base in a much more optimal manner.

Germany's advantage in rationalism — and the resulting political and image dividends — was also evident in matters concerning the deployment and use of its Armed Forces, particularly in the forward area of NATO's zone of responsibility. This is all the more remarkable given that official Warsaw avoided the appearance of ground contingents of the Bundeswehr on Polish territory. Here, at the request of the Republic of Poland, the US and British troops formed the basis of the presence of the bloc's SPR and forces during the largest military exercises. At the Anakonda 16 maneuvers (June 2016, a total of 31 thousand soldiers were involved), the Bundeswehr's contribution was limited to only one engineer battalion (0.4 thousand people).¹

Germany successfully circumvented this obstacle through several tactics. Firstly, in February 2015, the headquarters of the trilateral (Denmark, Germany, Poland) Multinational Corps Northeast was elevated to serve as the command of a NATO multinational division bearing the same name.² This staff led the Alliance's Forward Presence tactical groups in Poland and Lithuania. As a result, the Bundeswehr staff personnel was not only stationed in Poland but also began to play a significant role in commanding the troops stationed there under the bloc's flag.

Secondly, Germany has been developing a diversified system of ground military presence in Eastern Europe, largely bypassing Poland. To the north of Poland, this included the Bundeswehr contingent in Lithuania, which was being expanded into a full brigade by 2027. This formation was organizationally integrated with NATO Forward Presence units stationed in Poland, all subordinated to the command structures of the Multinational Division and Corps 'North—East'. To the south of Poland, between 2022 and 2024, the Bundeswehr participated in staffing NATO's battalion tactical group in Slovakia; during the initial phase of this formation's existence (spring—summer 2022), the German contingent was the largest.³ Since at least 2024, the deployment of Bundeswehr ground units in Romania has also been under practical consideration.

Thirdly, by the mid-2020s, Germany had established elements of its military presence in Poland in the fields of air force and air defence, responding to requests from official Warsaw. Poland's strategic focus on expanding its ground forces, coupled with comparatively less dynamic development in other branches of its armed forces, necessitated support from NATO partners in these areas, particularly neighbouring Germany. In May 2021, a bilateral interstate agreement was signed authorizing German fighter aircraft to operate in Polish airspace for patrol purposes.⁴ This activity intensified significantly from March 2022 onward, at the initiative of the Republic of Poland. In January 2025, the Bundeswehr deployed two Patriot air defence systems along with their personnel to areas ad-

¹ See: Anakonda 16. 2016, *DVIDS*, URL: <https://www.dvidshub.net/feature/Anakonda16> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² Trilateral Statement on HQ Multinational Corps Northeast at NATO Defence Ministers Meeting. 05.02.2015, *NATO*, p. 1—2.

³ Ende des operativen Auftrages in der Slowakei. 31.05.2024, *BMVg*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/eva-uebergabe-slowakei-rueckbau-5788720> (accessed 07.02.2025).

⁴ Deutsch-Polnische Zusammenarbeit im Luftraum gefestigt. 18.05.2021, *BMVg*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/luftwaffe/aktuelles/deutsch-polnische-zusammenarbeit-impluftraum-gefestigt-5083332> (accessed 07.02.2025).

jacent to the Ukrainian border.¹ In this way, Germany began to contribute to the security and defence of the Republic of Poland in two significant technical and technologically complex segments, which strengthened Berlin's position as the senior player in the dialogue.

This advantage was manifested in the difference in both the volume and composition of military equipment supplied by each side to Ukraine. In 2022–2023, military aid from the Republic of Poland amounted to approximately 3.5 billion dollars,² and Germany — 6.6 billion euros. This means that the difference in the volume of aid was nearly twofold in favour of Germany. In 2024, Germany allocated another 7.1 billion euros,³ maintaining 2nd position (after the USA) in terms of the volume of weapons and military equipment sent. Having significantly fewer resources, Poland directed the majority of them to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces. This is especially clear in the example of ground equipment, especially tanks: by 2025 Germany transferred 14 Leopard 2A6, 88 Leopard 1A5 to Ukraine,⁴ a total of 102 tanks. In turn, the RP sent 270 T-72, 40 PT-91 (modernized T-72), 14 Leopard 2A4, i.e. 324 tanks.⁵ Moreover, in other, non-land categories (primarily air defence systems), Germany was significantly ahead of its neighbour. Poland had the same focus on training personnel for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. At the end of 2022, under the auspices of the EU, the *EUMAM UA* military training mission was deployed, with two states at once taking on the leading role in its activities: Germany and Poland,⁶ and the largest centres were located respectively in the eastern and western parts of the neighbouring countries.

Conclusion

In the second half of the 2010s, Poland adopted a strategy of active pressure to bolster its position vis-à-vis Germany. This approach included interrupting the Weimar Triangle and the format of intergovernmental consultations, coordinating pressure with the United States, raising the issue of reparations, and accelerating the growth of its armed forces and military spending. Conversely, Germany pursued a strategy of active defence, consolidating and enhancing its seniority in the dialogue during the first half of the 2020s.

¹ Einsatzbereit: Bundeswehr unterstützt NATO-Luftverteidigung in Polen. 07.02.2025, *BMVg*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/einsaetze-bundeswehr/unterstuetzung-na-to-luftverteidigung-polen-5888214> (accessed 07.02.2025).

² The Ukrainian Prime Minister announced \$3.5 billion in aid received from Poland since 2022. 22.01.2024, *Izvestiya*, URL: <https://iz.ru/1638185/2024-01-22/premer-ukrainy-soobshchil-o-35-mlrd-poluchennoi-ot-polshi-pomoshchi-s-2022-goda> (accessed 07.02.2025).

³ Diese Waffen und militärische Ausrüstung liefert Deutschland an die Ukraine. 2025, *Bundeskanzleramt*, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/lieferungen-ukraine-2054514> (accessed 07.02.2025).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Number of disclosed main battle tanks committed to Ukraine as of January 2024, by type and donor country. 2024, *Statista*, URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1364974/ukraine-military-aid-tanks/> (accessed 07.02.2025).

⁶ Germany — EUMAM UA. 2025, *BMVg*, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/further-fmod-departments/bundeswehr-homeland-defence-command/germany-eumam-ua> (accessed 07.02.2025).

Geographically, official Berlin primarily confined the scope of its negotiations with Warsaw to the Baltic Sea region, Eastern Europe, and the western segment of the post-Soviet space. This delineation underscored the contrast between the Federal Republic of Germany, which aspired to establish itself as a global power, and the Republic of Poland, which remained a regional actor without integrating into the tetrarchy of leading NATO states. Overall, cooperation between the two was intricately interwoven with various facets of competition.

In the development and use of its armed forces Poland has focused primarily on quantitative aspects, and Germany — on qualitative ones, compensating for the advantage of the Polish Army in numbers by deploying a presence system in Eastern Europe, including a ground presence to the north and south of the Republic of Poland. Moreover, the two states have been actively seeking an effective division of competencies, with the Federal Republic of Germany functioning as a 'framework state' for a broad spectrum of multilateral NATO formations, including the Forward Presence units, while Poland has concentrated on building robust forces within its own territory. A particularly salient example of this practical cooperation is evident in the 'Suwalki Corridor', where the Bundeswehr's 45th Armoured Brigade stationed in Lithuania collaborates closely with units from the 16th and 18th Mechanized Divisions of the Polish Army. This coordinated effort is simultaneously directed against potential threats from the Kaliningrad region and the Republic of Belarus. Importantly, this instance represents a significant yet specific manifestation of the broader security challenges posed to the Russian Federation and Belarus by Poland's rapid military expansion alongside Germany's increasing military footprint in Eastern Europe.

The second presidency of Donald Trump (beginning in 2025) is likely to exert a comparatively lesser negative impact on the Republic of Poland's willingness to cooperate with Germany than during his first term. This is attributable, at least in part, to the mutually heightened interest of both Warsaw and Berlin in safeguarding their strategic positions in Ukraine and preventing any weakening of their influence in the region. In the longer term, Ukraine's potential accession to the European Union would stand to benefit Germany no less than Poland. Furthermore, such an enlargement would result in a partial diminution of Poland's leading role within the 'New Europe', thereby objectively enhancing Germany's standing in its bilateral and multilateral engagement with Ukraine.

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