

Security in Northern Europe in the Biden Era

Redesigning Multilateralism



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Realizing Effective Multilateralism

By Rachel Ellehuus

Just months into the Biden-Harris administration, the change in tone, message, and approach to transatlantic relations is palpable. President Biden has **reaffirmed** the U.S. commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and collective defense and has stated that a strong European Union is **in the U.S. interest**. The value ascribed to allies and partners is evident in the **Interim**

Security Strategy, which calls for working with allies to “promote fair distribution of power” and “reinvigorate and modernize our alliances and partnerships.” Reflecting its own eagerness to work with the incoming administration, the European Union released its EU-U.S. workplan, “**A New Transatlantic Agenda for Global Change**,” prior to the U.S. inauguration.

These statements have been backed by concrete actions. Within hours of assuming the presidency, President Biden returned the United States to the **Paris Climate Accords**, and in February, he **extended the New START Agreement** with Russia for five years. Also welcome among Europeans was Biden’s planned promise to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan **in consultation with allies**, in addition to his decision to not only **halt troop movements** out of Germany but to **increase the U.S. force presence** there. According to **a Pew poll** conducted after the

election, a majority of Europeans say they have “confidence in Biden to do the right thing in world affairs” and are “optimistic about their country’s relations with the United States.”

Yet as the Biden administration moves beyond its first 100 days, pressure to make progress on the transatlantic agenda is growing. On the upside, there is more alignment with allies on major foreign policy, security, and defense issues than with the previous administration. These issues include revitalizing NATO and strengthening European defense; deterring and countering Russian military and asymmetric threats; managing the technological, economic, and security challenges presented by China; and addressing climate change.

Certainly, there will be differences in policy and approach. The European Union’s agreement-in-principle on an EU-China Investment Agreement and Germany’s resolve to proceed with Nord Stream 2 despite U.S. (and European) concerns are two examples of how domestic interests—whether conveyed by the German *Mittelstand* or the U.S. Congress—might limit a common U.S.-EU approach. The test will be in the ability to overcome such differences in pursuit of the greater collective good.

Northern Europe as Testbed

In many ways, Northern Europe is a microcosm of the near-term challenges facing the transatlantic relationship. The first of these is Russia. Given their proximity to and, in some cases, shared borders with Russia, the United States’ Northern European allies and partners endeavor to maintain cooperative relations and open lines of communication with Russia while guarding against Russia’s aggressive military and asymmetric activities in the region. In **recent months**, Russia has continued its **military buildup** in the Arctic; **extended its claims** to the Arctic Ocean seabed; and flown an unusual number of **bomber and fighter sorties** in Northern Europe. Russia’s SolarWinds cyberattack on the United States and its cyberattack on the **Norwegian Parliament** last fall demonstrate the importance of also having adequate tools to attribute, defend against, and counter non-military attacks. U.S.-EU **coordinated sanctions** on the Navalny case, and the **European Union’s Joint Statement** expressing solidarity with the United States on the impact of the SolarWinds cyberattack are solid first steps.

As the Biden administration formulates a new Russia policy and conducts a Global Force Posture Review, it should build on the **comparative strengths** of Northern European allies and partners. Their hardened bases, specialized forces, resilient communications networks, and robust domain awareness capabilities can serve as a backbone for the U.S. presence in the region. Similarly, countries that employ a Total Defense concept (i.e., Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the Baltics) can share this expertise to improve national and NATO planning. Finally, Northern Europeans are at the forefront in new and emerging domains such as space, cyber, and artificial intelligence. The United Kingdom’s new **National Cyber Force** and **Space Command**, Finland’s work on international **law in cyberspace**, and allies’ allocation of offensive cyber capabilities to NATO are modernizing the alliance’s response options.

A second transatlantic challenge that manifests in Northern Europe on a smaller scale is China. While Europeans do not see China as a military threat in Europe, they are aware of the systemic challenges it presents across the political, security, economic, and techno-

logical domains. NATO is working on a vulnerability assessment and resilience measures, and several EU countries have established security criteria that effectively exclude Chinese companies. Last year, **Finland passed a security law** allowing the government to ban telecom network equipment if they “suspect the use of such equipment would endanger national security or defense.” **Sweden went a step further**, banning Huawei and ZTE in its 5G networks. In initial engagements with EU and NATO counterparts, U.S. leadership made clear that they are looking for EU support in establishing norms, pushing back on China’s unfair trade practices, and speaking out on its human rights abuses. At the same time, Secretary of State **Blinken explained** that, “the United States won’t force allies into an ‘us-or-them choice’ with China,” with President **Biden noting** that, “competition must not lock out cooperation on issues that affect us all,” such as climate.

Yet the reality is that Europe and the United States have significant economic interests in China. This has led to a policy of tacit compartmentalization whereby Europe and the United States seek to preserve economic ties with China while pushing back on its economic and human rights abuses. As attractive as it is, this approach may not be tenable. China has shown its willingness to punish those who criticize it on human rights or limit its market access. Western fashion brands such as Nike, H&M, and Burberry are **facing boycotts** for their criticism of China’s human rights abuses toward the country’s Uyghur Muslim minority, and Swedish telecoms giant Ericsson faced a **backlash against its business in China** following Sweden’s decision to ban Huawei and ZTE from Swedish 5G networks. To weather this aggression and force a change in Chinese behavior, the United States and Europe will need to align their sanctions, trade, export control, and vetting policies; stand firm in implementation; and offer a positive vision for the international system. Given their experience in **using legislation** (e.g., national security and investment laws) to address hybrid threats and build resilience, Northern European countries can be leaders in this process.

A final challenge on which Northern Europe is a vanguard is climate. In addition to advocacy for climate action at the European Union, the Nordics have introduced national measures to drive change. **Denmark** has banned new oil exploration licenses and will phase out fossil fuel extraction by 2050, and **Norway** will ban the sale of new gasoline and diesel cars by 2025 (the United Kingdom will do so in 2030). Under President Biden, the United States is again in step with Europe on reducing carbon emissions and recognizing climate change as a national security challenge. Concerning the Arctic, President Biden **has spoken** of his intent to “reestablish climate change as a priority for the Arctic Council,” in contrast to the previous U.S. administration, which **focused on economic development** of the region despite environmental concerns. NATO is considering initiatives to reduce the alliance’s carbon footprint, advance green defense initiatives, and build infrastructure resilience. Going forward, the Biden administration can draw on Northern European allies and partners’ expertise to advance climate issues at the European Union, NATO, and globally.

An Element of Risk

While the prospects for alignment and progress on the transatlantic agenda are bright, it is worth highlighting several risks. One is that, left with more responsibility, Europeans are unable to step up. As the United States focuses on domestic issues and devotes more attention to the Indo-Pacific, it will look to Europe to take on more responsibility in its neighborhood. Yet on several foreign policy issues—including Russia, the Eastern Medi-

terreanean, and the Balkans—there is a lack of political will and unity among EU member states. As such, U.S. empowerment of Europeans could serve as either a useful catalyst for alignment or fresh air igniting divisions.

Additionally, as highlighted above, there is the risk that either the United States or European countries will prioritize narrow national interests at the expense of the larger collective good. While the coronavirus pandemic has revealed the importance of a collective response to global crises, it has also reinforced an every-nation-for-itself behavior. In the United States, this involves calls for nationalizing supply chains or **instituting Buy America provisions**. In the European Union, recent **limits on vaccine export** and early attempts to **impose national taxes** on U.S. technology firms could inhibit more effective, collective action.

Conclusion

To be sure, most Europeans welcome the return of U.S. leadership and engagement, respect for multilateralism, and predictability and transparency in U.S. foreign and security policy under President Biden. As the United States and Europe navigate a challenging transatlantic agenda, they must work earnestly to find common ground and reconcile differences in private, lest adversaries exploit these differences. More importantly, they must demonstrate that consultation, compromise, and treating one another with respect produces better, and more enduring, results than bullying and intimidation, making effective multilateralism a reality.¹

Rachel Ellehuus is deputy director and senior fellow with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Prior to joining CSIS, she was the principal director for European and NATO Policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defence in the Pentagon.



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Deterrence and Diplomacy in the Arctic: Assessing U.S. and Norwegian Security Priorities

By Robin Allers, Karen-Anna Eggen, and Johannes Gullestad Rø

Introduction

Recent U.S. strategy documents highlight the strategic importance of the Arctic. Acknowledging that receding ice opens the Arctic for

more activity and competition, the strategies promote increased military presence. This

¹ The term “effective multilateralism” was coined in the 2003 European Security Strategy.

affects Norwegian security policy. Adapting to fluctuating U.S. interests and deployment patterns in the Arctic and the North Atlantic has been a constant feature of Norwegian security policy since the inception of NATO. Norway encourages allied and U.S. military presence—the latest example being the bilateral **Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement**—as it contributes to deterrence and enables the reinforcement of Norway with Arctic-capable forces. All the same, **Norwegian authorities are concerned** that increased Russian and allied military activity might destabilize this peaceful region.

This essay evaluates the security relationship between the United States and Norway, assesses how **the Biden administration's security policy outline** might affect the Arctic, and concludes that the security implications of the United States-China rivalry will, at least for now, be relatively limited in the Arctic, given China's insignificant military presence in the region. In contrast, the Biden administration's approach will certainly affect regional stability with respect to Russia. The U.S. emphasis on consultations with allies is an opportunity for Norway to engage the new administration in dialogue on the merits of well-tested reassurance measures.

The Trump Years: Military Collaboration Despite Political Turmoil

The **U.S. strategy documents on Arctic security** produced during Trump's presidency are tailored to protect U.S. security interests “in an era of strategic competition.” The regional strategies highlight homeland defense and protecting U.S. and allied interests by regaining a competitive military edge against Russia and China.

The strategies emphasized both the desire to preserve a peaceful Arctic and the region's potential of becoming an arena of great power competition. The latter scenario called for securing freedom of navigation and overflight and limiting China and Russia's abilities to advance their strategic objectives in the region. Allied cooperation and capabilities were presented as **a key U.S. advantage** in that respect.

The bedrock of U.S.-Norwegian defense cooperation is Norway's geographic proximity to Russia's military assets. Norway **possesses the expertise and surveillance equipment** required to maintain up-to-date situational awareness, thus contributing to strategic stability in the High North. Norwegian infrastructure is also a valuable strategic asset for landing, docking, stationing, and prepositioning equipment.

Trump's criticism of NATO, his disdain for the European Union, and his focus on Asian security created an impression that the **United States was bent on political and military retrenchment away from Europe**. This led to louder calls for **European strategic autonomy**. Although Norway and other Northern European countries mostly steered away from this debate, a volatile U.S. political landscape and the prospect of prolonged transatlantic discord led some to question the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. A vocal fringe of scholars, policymakers, and defense experts even argued that Norway **contributed to intensifying the security competition with Russia** by facilitating U.S. deployment in Norway's vicinity.

In contrast, the top echelons of the Norwegian government and military insisted on stepping up training and exercising with allies in the region. Still, even this group grappled with the scale and scope of the military activity. As balancing deterrence and reassurance

is a trademark of Norwegian policy, many worried that stabilizing mechanisms, such as Norwegian-Russian cooperation in **maritime and airspace safety**, might be undermined if other allies operating in the region did not pay heed to them. The U.S. dynamic force deployment concept of being “strategically predictable, but operationally unpredictable” was apt to **make the balancing act more precarious**, potentially **increasing tensions** and upsetting regional power structures. Therefore, a certain reluctance to participate in allied-led **show-of-force missions** was discernable.

Despite this, the Norwegian government never reconsidered the strategic tenet that NATO, under U.S. leadership, is the “linchpin” in Norwegian security. Instead, the government’s **long-term plan (LTP) for the defense sector**, launched in 2020, emphasized the importance of **strong bilateral ties** and operational integration with the United States. Furthermore, decisionmakers in Oslo underscored that Trump’s tweets **mattered less than U.S. actions**.

This argument was justified by the long record of increased **U.S. material investments and military operations in Europe since 2014**. During this time, Norway agreed to a new arrangement for U.S. Marines, increased joint training and exercises, and extended collaboration on equipment and stocks. Will this trajectory continue with the Biden presidency?

Biden’s Build Back Better: Challenges and Opportunities for Norway

With Biden, **diplomacy, cooperation, and multilateralism** are back in the U.S. toolbox. This will likely benefit transatlantic relations. It already has reduced uncertainty and lifted spirits in European capitals, including Oslo. Nevertheless, allies should take note of the elements of continuity in Biden’s agenda.

For example, the expectation of allied reciprocity or, rather, of alliances as “**force multipliers**” remains. The United States is willing to engage, but efforts to reinvigorate alliances will likely still be accompanied by calls for more balanced burden sharing. For Norway, this may imply ongoing pressure on military spending and deepening interoperability through capability and infrastructure projects, as well as joint training and exercises.

Another continuity is the growing rivalry between China and Russia. European allies share U.S. concerns and are willing to unite in a common front. However, pressuring allies to formulate a firmer stance may face opposition. A case in point is **the U.S. position on Nord Stream II**. Furthermore, both the European Union and Norway have negotiated free trade agreements with China, well-aware that ratification might go against U.S. preferences.

The Biden administration states that it will be both tough on China and Russia but also strive for “**meaningful dialogue**” on shared interests. The success of this blend, and the extent to which the administration invites others to help craft it, is crucial for allies such as Norway. It will impact the security environment and define the latitude for individual policies. Oslo will closely monitor how the United States decides to approach Russia in the Arctic, as this will significantly impact regional tensions.

U.S. Arctic policy rests on enduring interests in securing resources, protecting the northern flank, and showcasing the United States as a credible diplomatic, scientific, economic, and military actor with global interests and reach. In that sense, no substantial policy upset is in the

offing, although the newest strategies suggest an extension of the concept of dynamic force deployment. The Army wants to regain “**Arctic dominance**” by projecting “power from, within, and into the Arctic.” **U.S. naval forces** are ready to accept calculated tactical risks in order to hinder adversarial strategic gains, testifying to the continued relevance of assertiveness.

However, the importance of dialogue is also evident. Early indications suggest that the Biden administration will strive to balance **day-to-day competition** with increased **diplomacy and cooperation**. Increased attention to climate will also foster new opportunities for dialogue.

Norway is likely to endorse both elements. It seeks **to remain tightly integrated in the NATO and U.S. deterrence posture** while also supporting new and ongoing dialogue. Regardless of the U.S. approach, balancing deterrence and reassurance will remain a challenge for Norway.

Conclusion

European allies should use the Biden administration’s outreach to find common ground in the face of what **NATO’s secretary general calls** “the most complex security environment since the end of the Cold War.” The liberal order is in flux and the United States no longer sees itself as an **unrivaled power**. The strategic ramifications of this development are far-reaching—even the Arctic has become an arena of **increased great power rivalry**.

Indeed, China has increased its investment, research, diplomacy, and intelligence presence in the region. It has aired **ambitions** of establishing a “polar silk road,” participated in Russian military exercises, and sailed the Arctic with Chinese-built icebreakers. However, although this development merits attention, its hard security implications are still minimal. As such, NATO’s response will have a marginal impact on Chinese activity in the region. With Russia, the story is very different. How the Biden administration blends military deployments and diplomacy—and what type of role allies are ascribed—will have a large impact on tensions in the region.

In a more active Arctic, allied military deployments from and around Norway are likely to increase—and with this, so will requests for Norwegian contributions to NATO’s deterrence posture. Recent Norwegian defense planning indicates a willingness to share the burden, and increased competition represents both opportunities and challenges to Norway’s traditional role in the region. The Biden administration appears to believe in the power of diplomacy and consultation. Norway could seize this opportunity to leverage its stature as a dependable ally and key Arctic stakeholder and to promote a joint course that combines deterrence with restraint, where it can be both a force multiplier and a facilitator of low tension and strategic stability.

Robin Allers, Karen-Anna Eggen, and Johannes Gullestad Rø are researchers affiliated with the *Security in Northern Europe programme at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS)*.



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Global Britain: A New Era in Transatlantic Relations?

By Paul O'Neill

In March 2021, the United Kingdom published its Integrated Review. Launched as the **biggest review** of foreign, defense, security and development policy since the end of the Cold War, expectations were high. The Integrated Review has a wider scope than previous defense and security reviews, in part by giving

a higher profile to domestic issues—a step both sensible and overdue since a nation’s external image is impacted by how it behaves at home. The Integrated Review was followed a week later by the **Defence Command Paper**, which outlines plans for defense in more detail. Strategies on resilience, cyber, and international development are also forthcoming.

The Vision for Global Britain

Global Britain in a Competitive Age, as the Integrated Review is titled, provides an effective analysis of the threats and trends shaping the security environment and sets a vision for the United Kingdom’s place in the world. Most significantly, it confirms that the United Kingdom remains a committed international actor. Despite domestic concerns about the strength of the internal bonds in the United Kingdom, the review lays to rest any idea that post-Brexit Britain will be isolationist. It sets out an ambitious agenda in which the United Kingdom will be “a problem-solving and burden-sharing nation with a global perspective.” Refreshingly, this acknowledges the responsibilities that come with Britain’s position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and as a member of the Commonwealth and G7.

Another significant change is the commitment to “shape the international order of the future.” This acknowledges that protecting or defending the status quo is no longer viable. While no detail is provided, the characteristics of the new order are clear: open societies; democratic values; good governance, nationally and internationally, with the ability to manage tensions between great powers; and multilateralism. This can only be achieved through transatlantic partnership. As the United States and Europe are both open and democratic trading nations sharing similar values, the transatlantic relationship will be vital.

In many respects, the “Global Britain” theme of the Integrated Review adopts a sixteenth century Elizabethan perspective: a strong navy should exert a dominant influence on the sea and trade routes, with a small army that should try to avoid continental wars. These mercantilist overtones arguably represent a return to centuries of British strategy. For an island nation reliant on trade, a maritime-focused approach makes sense. Even the “tilt” toward the Indo-Pacific is more diplomatic and economic than an assertion of a substan-

tial military commitment or presence. With the balance of global economic wealth moving toward the Indo-Pacific, a trading nation could do little else, even without the loss of access to the European market. However, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), not the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), remains the United Kingdom's principal military commitment, and UK security continues to be bound to that of the rest of Europe and the United States.

The United States **remains** “the UK's most important strategic ally and partner,” and the Indo-Pacific tilt clearly reflects U.S. foreign policy interests, although the treatment of China is more ambiguous than in the Biden administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. The Indo-Pacific region is given more weight than in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, but at the expense of the Middle East and North Africa, which have less prominence than in the past. The review's emphasis on climate change is also likely to appeal to the Biden administration.

While the United Kingdom will remain “deeply invested in the security and prosperity of Europe,” the review is awkward in describing the approach to the European Union. UK security is more closely entwined with the European Union than the paper suggests, and the British preference for engaging bilaterally or through NATO may not be one EU nations share. The review appears to prioritize the new national interest of “sovereignty” ahead of security, which is particularly felt in relation to **policing and law enforcement**. Difficulties with the European Union may also impact industrial cooperation with European partners, in turn affecting the United Kingdom's *Defence and Security Industrial Strategy*. The next Integrated Review should do a better job of describing Britain's relationship with the European Union, for which a more permissive domestic political environment is essential.

Middle Power Britain

While not explicitly stated, the review infers that the United Kingdom is a **middle power**, even if a substantial one. But middle powers must work together to have influence. Reliability and trust are important in relationships and in generating normative power, and the United Kingdom may have some **catching up to do**. The review's focus on national interests and cooperation when it is to the United Kingdom's benefit is transactional and prioritizes outcomes—but relationships themselves have value, and making a relationship work means compromise and, occasionally, suboptimal outcomes for longer-term value.

While Global Britain is described well, the Integrated Review is not a strategy that reconciles national ends, ways, and means. Numerous strategies, plans, and programs plotting the journey are promised. This provides considerable freedom to respond to events but makes the review's overall impact difficult to assess. While the review offers a north-star to guide action across the government, its result is arguably more fragmented than the non-integrated reviews of 2010, 2015, and 2017–2018.

Defence Command Paper: Putting Flesh on the Bones?

The Defence Command Paper, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, followed within a week of the Integrated Review. Identifying Russia as “the greatest nuclear, conventional military, and sub-threshold threat to European security,” the Command Paper reaffirms an unwavering commitment to NATO underpinned by the **increased defense spending**

announced in November 2020—a 14 percent increase to £188 billion (roughly \$260 billion) over four years.

Despite the clear threat from Russia and importance of Euro-Atlantic security, the Command Paper is unconvincing. The United Kingdom will reduce mass to pay for its modernization, which differs from the approach of other NATO members, for whom the importance of mass is confirmed by the security situation. New forces and capabilities, many yet unproven, are promised in the future, but with little detail about how to get there. The gamble appears to be that conventional forces will be modernized before they are needed. The paper does not provide a convincing narrative for mitigating the risk should that assumption prove wrong.

Yet thickening nuclear and below-threshold capabilities is stretching the middle, potentially hollowing the structure should it be called to fight. Hardest hit is the **British Army**, which is decreasing to 72,500 regulars, with modernized, but smaller, armored forces. The **Royal Air Force** loses some capabilities, and the number of additional F-35s the United Kingdom will buy beyond the initial 48 is vague. Of the three services, the **Royal Navy** has done best, which is consistent with the Integrated Review's maritime focus and plays well to shipbuilding and prosperity. In fact, wherever capability is linked to UK industry and prosperity, it does better. This includes investment in unmanned systems, research and development (R&D), and experimentation, which are all welcome.

Smaller forces require integration, especially with allies and partners, and there is a clear desire to partner at all levels—as a division within a corps and through partner operations, both for fighting against adversaries and in peacekeeping. NATO, the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force with France, and the Joint Expeditionary Force are all important commitments reflected throughout the paper, as are anti-submarine warfare operations in the North Atlantic with key allies such as the United States and Norway.

Like the Integrated Review, the Command Paper lacks detail in key areas, and at this stage, it is hard to be confident that it has avoided the **problems of previous Integrated Reviews**: a belief in the transformative power of technology allowing smaller forces to deliver the ambition; a subsequent realization that the equipment program is unaffordable without additional investment; and the release of money for new capabilities by declaring old capabilities unnecessary, only for events to intrude on these assumptions. Moreover, even if the technology works and is as decisive as hoped for, and the United Kingdom's hand is not called before the Ministry of Defence has transformed, in some respects the armed forces will still be **less capable than today** at the end of the planning period for the kind of enduring operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that have been their focus for the last 20 years. For this reason, broadening and deepening relationships with allies is vital.

Conclusion

The intention and scope of the Integrated Review are laudable. It asserts a confident, outward-facing Britain for whom transatlantic relationships are crucial. The commitment to European defense is also clear. Yet despite Russia's greater prominence as a threat in 2021, the emphasis appears to be on the persistent distributed use of force around the world. It

is also not clear how the **strategic framework will guide choices**, especially where different elements are competing for scarce resources.

There is reason to be optimistic, not least with increased funding and modernization plans on the table. However, the lack of detail in the capstone documents means this optimism should be cautious. As Churchill advised, “however beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.”

Paul O’Neill is a senior research fellow in Military Sciences at the Royal United Services Institute. He has worked on the United Kingdom’s Strategic Defence and Security Reviews in 2010 and 2015. His research interests cover defense strategy, NATO, military doctrine, and organizational aspects of defense.



Pictured are candidates for German chancellor Armin Laschet of the Christian Democratic Union and Annalena Baerbock of the Green Party.

Christof Stache/AFP via Getty Images

Germany and Defense: The Next Five Years

By Claudia Major and Christian Mölling

Germany’s contribution to the defense of the European security order is essential, yet it remains highly controversial domestically. The German defense sector has become deeply fragmented and urgently needs restructuring to be able to deal with current and future threats. As it stands, political acceptance for and meaningful decisionmaking in German defense policy are often

in short supply. The beginning of the next legislative period in September 2021 offers a favorable window of opportunity to launch the necessary reforms, as it comes with several crucial changes: the chancellor will change, as Angela Merkel is not running again; the governing coalition is likely to change and include the Green party; and a larger number of parliament members will change, bringing not only a generational change but also new approaches to security and defense (for better or worse).

Three core tasks should be on the agenda of the new government: (1) improving linkages between national security policy and society; (2) consciously and systematically engaging with international partners; and (3) reorganizing the German defense sector (i.e., the armed forces, Ministry of Defence, and budgeting and procurement system). Germany has better chances to succeed when supported by its allies and partners, who can remind Berlin of its international responsibilities.

Germany's Military Contribution to European Defense: Politics and Policy Challenges

Germany's geostrategic position in central Europe, its economic power, and the size of its armed forces and command structures make it a central factor in Europe's deterrence and defense posture. However, despite some changes over the last decade, Germany's restraint on defense remains a defining factor: defense has little public support, remains controversial, and does not figure high on the policy agenda. If it does, it is usually due to scandals rather than to bold initiatives.

Over the last decade, particularly since the so-called 2014 Munich Consensus, when leading German politicians called for greater international commitment, Germany has made remarkable progress in defense policy. It has defined new strategic guidelines with the 2016 **White Book on Defense**; increased **defense spending** (from some €33 billion in 2013 to almost €46 billion in 2020, or roughly \$39.9 billion to \$55.6 billion); intensified its military commitment in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, such as **leading** one of NATO's enhanced forward presence battalions in the Baltic countries; and demonstrated political leadership in shaping EU sanctions against Russia after 2014 and launching new EU defense initiatives, such as the European Defense Fund. Unfortunately, this dynamic has slowed since 2017, during Chancellor Merkel's last term, and deep, structural deficits in the defense sector and in policymaking have continued growing.

These structural deficits include:

- **A Lack of Understanding of Defense as a Power Resource:** Many German political elites hardly acknowledge that military power has again become a key part of the global power equation. Yet those who want to respond to changing balances of power and deal with systemic competition will have to play this card alongside diplomatic and economic tools.
- **Low Readiness of the Armed Forces:** Decades of underinvestment, poor management, and lack of attention have reduced the technological edge of the Bundeswehr and **affected** the availability of forces for either collective defense or deployed operations.
- **A Wrecked Procurement System:** Germany's overregulated, outdated **system** is a considerable obstacle to swiftly beefing up capabilities again. Therefore, it is not only a question of money but also the ability to spend it effectively and wisely.
- **Missing Public Support:** While the armed forces rank highly in terms of public trust, their activities do not garner much support. This is due to several factors, including a lack of understanding and a view of liberal interventionism as the extent of current military tasks—thereby misunderstanding the general nature of most Western forces as defensive tools dedicated to deterrence.

These issues have amalgamated into an interlocking problem landscape. For example, missing air defense is not only a problem of limited resources but also of an inadequate procurement organization and a lack of political understanding of the renewed importance of this capability in today's threat landscape. Under these conditions, simple, incremental solutions will not deliver. Tough decisions are needed to cut the Gordian knot.

To do this, the new government must first come into place. However, with the upcoming elections, it is politics first, policies second, for the time being. It is not the structural problems of German defense that will feature highly in the election, but those that polarize—such as spending, nuclear sharing, defense export policies, and use of drones.

The Three “No-fun” Phases Ahead in German Politics

While German defense policy has been driven mostly by domestic issues and solidarity with partners (rather than security considerations), the election campaign will turn it even more inward. This navel-gazing will run through three phases: the election campaign through September; the subsequent coalition treaty negotiation; and the first months of the new government. Far from stopping with the September elections, debates on defense policy will continue and likely intensify with the first decisions of the new government when politics meets reality.

Phase One – Election Campaign: German election campaigns tend to be sleepy and only intensify in the final weeks. But this time is different due to shifts in party leadership, changing coalition dynamics, and the issues on the table. In addition to the end of Angela Merkel’s 16-year chancellorship, changes are likely in the governing coalition (likely to include the Green party) and in parliament, which may see significant generational change.

In terms of party leadership, it took Merkel’s own conservative Christian Democratic Union party until April 20 and a bitter, almost self-defeating, **infight** to nominate Armin Laschet as candidate for chancellor. Laschet’s reputation was severely damaged by the fight, and he is not known for his foreign policy credentials.

On April 19, the Green Party, which has become the second most popular party, nominated for the first time ever a chancellor candidate, Annalena Baerbock, who is known to be an efficient manager and a dedicated European. For a likely Green-Conservative coalition, it will be challenging to find common ground on security and defense.

The Social Democrats have also undergone a self-defeating process to define their candidate. With current finance minister and vice chancellor Olaf Scholz, they chose a mainstream candidate with recognized government experience. Yet he is surrounded by two left-wing party leaderspotenti and an equally left-wing, powerful head of the parliamentary group. The latter has a clearly defined security and defense position—against nuclear sharing and NATO’s 2 percent defense spending pledge and pro-disarmament.

Finally, defense might play a role. Political parties seem tempted to use defense issues to differentiate themselves from one another. This could include scandalizing certain topics, particularly the use of armed drones, arms exports, defense spending, and nuclear issues.

Phase Two – Coalition Negotiation: In Germany, coalition negotiations among parties are usually necessary as no party is able to individually secure a majority. This agreement is formulated into a coalition treaty, which contains a four-year work program. What is mentioned in the agreement is difficult to ignore. Hence, the defense language will be important, including how coalition partners bridge their differences and agree on a common government program.

In the past, this negotiation period took several weeks, and the new government was sworn in before Christmas. Yet four years ago, it took **until** spring the following year to agree—an unprecedented situation in German history. Until the new government is in place, the previous one acts as a caretaker, preventing Germany from taking any strategic or contentious decisions.

During this phase, the key positions in the parliamentary groups and the parliament's committees are also appointed. They are key, as parliament has a crucial role in defense, from authorizing procurement (for any item above €25 million, or roughly \$30.1 million) to military deployments.

Phase Three – New Government: This encompasses roughly the first year of the new government. As the coalition will include new actors, Berlin's allies should expect a steep and sometimes painful learning curve when principles and good intentions meet with reality. This applies particularly to the Greens, who have not been in power at the federal level since 2005 and tend to take principled positions on defense, which usually differ from those of potential conservative or liberal coalition partners. Contentious areas to watch include industrial cooperation and arms exports; deployments of the armed forces; and principles-based stands on Russia and China.

What Can Allies and Partners Do?

This uncertainty is likely to last well into 2023, portending a difficult time for decisive cooperation with Germany's allies and partners, who would be well-advised to understand the driving forces and logic behind these shifting positions and explore the room for maneuver and compromise to support the new government.

The challenge for Germany is to find a new dynamic for the coming years, built upon a convincing narrative, and find the courage to address its deeply enshrined structural defense problems. To be clear: addressing these structural and political challenges is not something that garners a German politician the support of the public—as defense issues remain highly controversial. Nor does it help in internal party power positioning: in Germany, you can lose elections or minister portfolios over defense issues, and you hardly win them. This decreases the chances for the next government to consciously engage in the badly needed structural changes and be successful.

As allies and partners seek to engage, there is a risk their well-intended comments might trigger unintended and counterproductive reactions in the German debate. Discussions with the comparatively small group of people interested in and knowledgeable on defense is like preaching to the converted.

Yet, there are three options to externally support the small defense community by helping political elites to understand the relevance of defense. First, explain how important or controversial defense is in your country compared to other topics, how defense interacts with other issues (from climate change to industry), and where parallels with Germany exist. A second option is to effectively tease out or build on German self-images or stereotypes to get Germany to act. For example, insofar as Germans want to be good Europeans

and helpful members of NATO, it can help to remind politicians of the importance of the multilateral order, the need to defend it, and the value of alliances and partners in this pursuit. Finally, Germany thinks of itself as a well-organized, efficient country and a land of engineers. It is almost unbearable to have a military that does not work—and even more unbearable to have allies and partners that know that.

***Dr. Claudia Major** is head of the International Security Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin. **Dr. Christian Mölling** is the research director of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). He also heads the Security and Defence Program. His research focuses on security and defence policy, military capabilities, and the defence industry.*

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