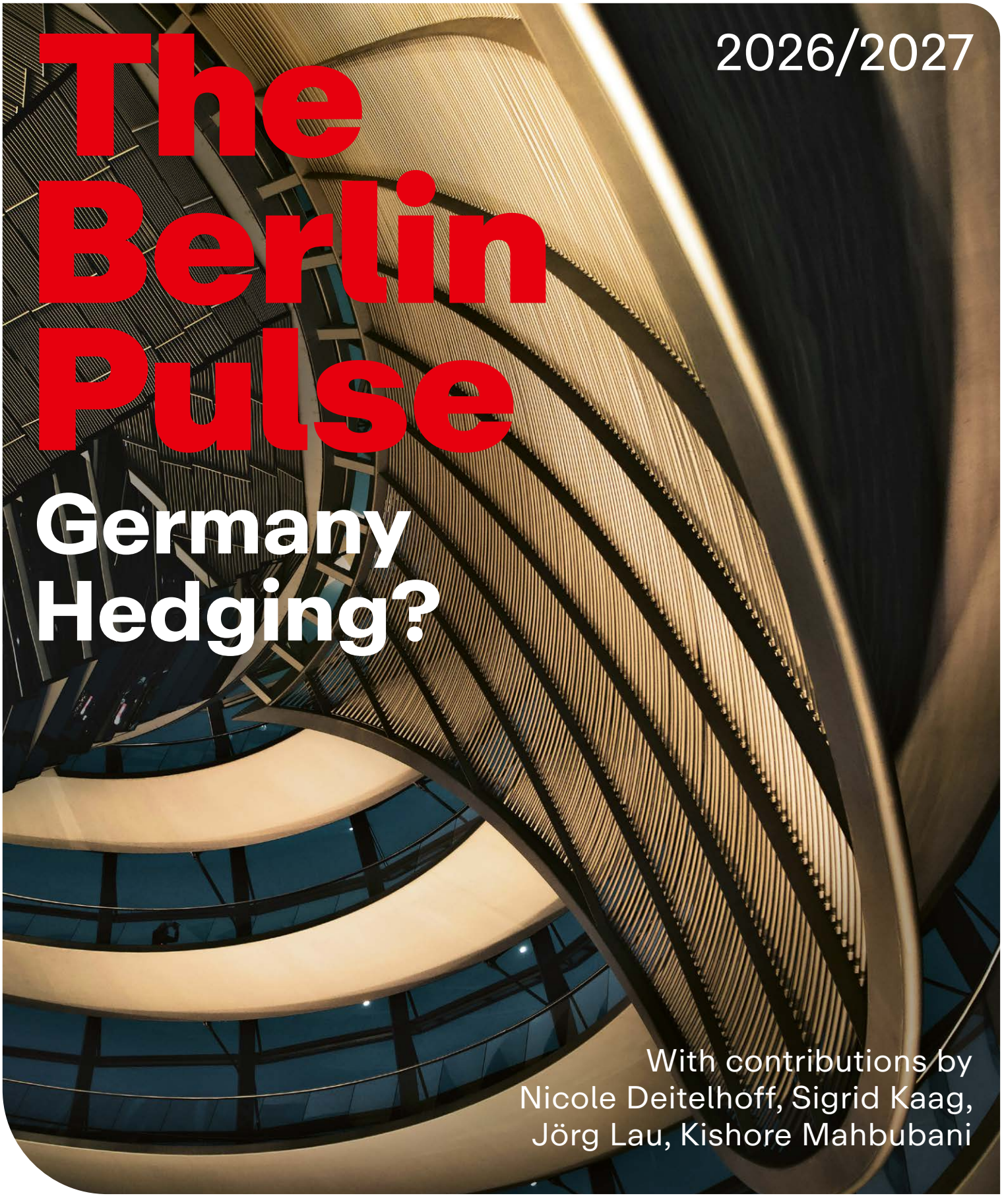
The Berlin Pulse

2026/2027

Germany Hedging?



With contributions by
Nicole Deitelhoff, Sigrid Kaag,
Jörg Lau, Kishore Mahbubani

Körber Stiftung



The German Public Pulls Back

The Berlin Pulse Survey 2026/2027

A representative survey on German and US attitudes to foreign policy

Only **46 %** of Germans support military aid to Ukraine.

But **82 %** continue to see Russia as a military threat.

64 % of Germans oppose taking on a military leadership role in Europe.

Consistent with that: **48 %** of Germans believe Germany should exercise more restraint on international crises.

Only **37 %** of Germans say that the West still exists as a political and cultural entity.

A likely reason: just **21 %** rate German-American relations as good.

54 % of Germans say the EU can stand up to the United States and China.

83 % favour Germany remaining neutral in the conflict between the two.



Germany Hedging?









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Dear readers,

Welcome to *The Berlin Pulse*!

This edition marks its tenth anniversary. Since 2017, more than 200 authors have contributed to it, more than 10,000 Germans have taken part in our surveys, and it has been downloaded almost 100,000 times.

Back then, a new US president had just unsettled the transatlantic relationship. Few could have imagined Germany aspiring to build Europe's strongest army. Or that, as this year's survey shows, 83 per cent of German respondents would want their country to remain neutral between China and the United States. Ten years on, the question is no longer whether the transatlantic partnership is changing, but what is left of it (and of the West) and who gets to define it.

Sixty-one per cent of German respondents no longer see the West as meaning the political and cultural unity of Europe and the United States, and only 21 per cent view relations with Washington positively. Thanks to our partner, the Pew Research Center, we see that American respondents view it differently: 62 per cent still rate relations as good, although that share is falling too.

The struggle over the West is also a struggle over its meaning. Kishore Mahbubani argues that its double standards have cost the West its moral authority and calls on it to share power. Jörg Lau wants Germany to defend Western values more vigorously, if necessary against the current US government, but as part of a humbler West.

The erosion of the West also runs through our own society. Supporters of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party share the majority's view that the West has lost its unity but draw very different conclusions from those of the political centre: they strongly reject international engagement and favour normalizing relations with Russia. Pauline von Pezold explains why, and we map the world as AfD supporters see it.

Our first edition in 2017 asked how much leeway a German government has between international expectations and domestic constraints. Today, the expectations come from partners who no longer agree on what the West stands for, and the constraints from a public that never has been so reluctant when it comes to Germany's international engagement. Are Germans responding to the world's growing uncertainty by retreating from international responsibility? If so, the country's foreign policy faces a major test.

Our founder Kurt A. Körber's motto – 'Talk to each other rather than about each other' – has guided this publication from the start. It has rarely been more needed across the Atlantic and within our own society.

A big thank you to our editorial team – Florian Bigge, Denise Ersoy, Jonathan Lehrer and Lilli Sofie Blank – for putting together an excellent tenth edition of *The Berlin Pulse*.

November 2026



Thomas Paulsen
Chairman of the Executive Board
Körber-Stiftung

Practice What You Preach

The West has plunged the world into war after war, and yet it still lectures others. Kishore Mahbubani on why we need a wiser West.



The single biggest source of global instability today is the continued desire, conscious and unconscious, by the West to continue its domination of the world. There is no question that it dominated world history in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 19th century, European powers almost effortlessly colonized all corners of the world. In the 20th century, the West triumphed in all the great contests: the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War. Given these great successes, it was natural for Western minds to believe that it could continue dominating the world.

But the world has changed fundamentally. Just look at the power shifts that have happened in the 21st century. In 2000, the combined GDP of the European Union members was seven times bigger than China's. Now they are about the same size and by 2050 the EU's economy will be half the size of China's. Similarly, in 2000, the British economy was 3.5 times bigger than India's. Today, India's economy is bigger and by 2050 it will be four times bigger. This spectacular 'return' of China and India is perfectly natural as they had the world's two largest economies for 1,800 of the past 2,000 years.

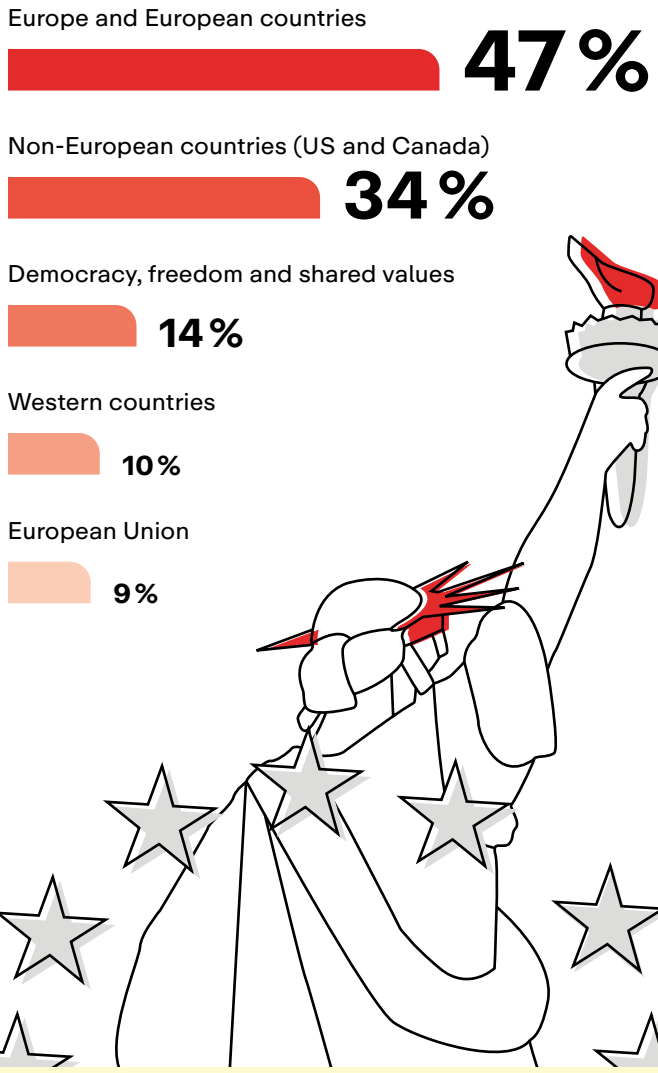
How many bombs did China drop? The answer is zero.

Western minds believe that Western civilization is the most rational and thoughtful one in the world, and that this explains its exceptional success. Yet, the West has not responded rationally or thoughtfully to the great power shifts of the 21st century. Instead, it has demonstrated geopolitical incompetence and, more damagingly, shocking double standards when it passes moral judgements on international issues.

Its geopolitical incompetence is demonstrated by the number of unnecessary and illegal wars it has launched, especially since the end of the Cold War. When that conflict ended, Western populations believed that they would enjoy a peace dividend. Instead, Western policymakers became trigger-happy and initiated or indirectly caused several disastrous wars. Here is one statistic that all Western minds should ponder. According to the Costs of War Project at Brown University, after 9/11, US military interventions, often backed by many Western states, led to an estimated 940,000 people being killed across the Middle East. Indirectly, another 3.6 to 3.8 million people died as a result of these wars. And how many bombs did China drop in the same period? The answer is zero. Despite this, in a massive act of self-deception, Western minds believe that the West is inherently peaceful while China is not.

The Iraq War was clearly illegal, as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan confirmed. So too was the Libya War. By toppling Libya's leader, Muammar Gaddafi, France and the United Kingdom created a failed state, immiserating millions of Libyans. And the West's geopolitical incompetence extended beyond the wars it directly participated in. It was right when it said that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was illegal. Yet many Western policymakers, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas, go on to claim that the war was unprovoked. Western leaders insult the intelligence of the rest of humanity when they make this claim. As Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said in 2022, 'Putin shouldn't have invaded Ukraine. But it's not just Putin who is guilty. The United States and the EU are also guilty. What was the reason for the Ukraine

What does the term the West mean to you personally?



invasion? NATO? Then the United States and Europe should have said: 'Ukraine won't join NATO.' That would have solved the problem.' While Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and France's President Nicolas Sarkozy had blocked Ukraine and Georgia's NATO's accession in 2008, they also agreed to the alliance's declaration that both would eventually become members. Naturally, this led to significant Russian concern, which many in the Global South found valid. This explains why countries accounting for 85 per cent of the world's population did not join the West in imposing sanctions on Russia.

The Ukraine War has also exposed the duplicity of the West in another way. Western leaders were right in criticizing Russia for the loss of innocent civilian lives, including children, yet when many more civilians, especially children, were killed in the Gaza War, they remained largely silent. No one respects a priest who preaches marital fidelity while being unfaithful himself. This is how the West is now viewed in the rest of the world – as totally shorn of its moral robes.

The West should learn to share power

There is a better course for the West. It can take three steps. First, it should acknowledge the folly of its post-Cold War interventionist streak. Here is one small step the West can take: emulate China and drop no bombs. That alone would make the world a more peaceful place.

Second, the West should get off its moral pedestal and stop lecturing the world. It should learn to be humble and acknowledge that we are moving into a multi-civilizational world where other civilizations will choose their own paths. China and India, for example, will modernize but never Westernize.

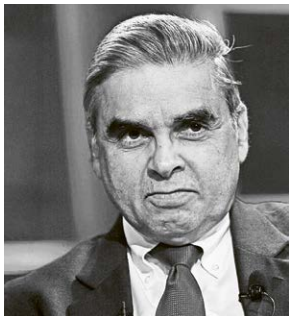
Third, as its power shrinks, the West should stop its policy of dominating key international organizations. It should not insist that the International Monetary Fund and World Bank must be run only by Westerners. And the United Kingdom should give up its seat on the UN Security Council to India. In short, the West should learn to share power in the 21st century.

The world no longer respects them when they act as moral guardians

What does this mean for Germany? To his credit, Chancellor Olaf Scholz recognized that the world had changed. He said in 2022 that the world that Europeans were used to, 'in which almost everything that was decided or became economically relevant was centred on Europe and North America' had seen a 'total makeover'. In a 2023 speech, he said that, when he spoke to leaders from the Global South, he found that they noticed the unequal application of Western principles, and he added: 'What they expect is representation on equal terms – and an end to Western double standards.'

However, despite these noble sentiments, he was not able to curb the double standards of his foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, who once said that Europe should act as a global watchdog. When she went to China, she criticized China on human rights, to which her counterpart, Qin Gang, replied that 'What China needs least is a teacher from the West.' In 2024, Amnesty International Germany criticized the country's leadership for remaining silent about the war crimes committed by the Israeli army, saying that Germany has thereby lost credibility. 'Double standards are not compatible with the human rights-based foreign policy that Annalena Baerbock has announced', said the organization's secretary-general, Julia Duchrow.

Germans and Europeans must realize that the world no longer respects them when they pretend to act as moral guardians of the world. In short, the West is as imperfect as the rest. It should now learn to treat the rest with equal respect. ↖



Kishore Mahbubani
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Coming Soon: The New West

One might think Trump's bullying has sealed the West's fate. But it does not have to be that way, argues Jörg Lau.

The current rupture between Europe and the United States about the meaning of the West has been a long time coming – at least since the dispute about the war against Iraq. But it took Donald Trump's re-election to the US presidency to bring it out in the open.

Since he returned to the White House, the divide about terms like 'Western civilization' is deepening. To the shock of the German government, this US administration defines the West in terms that exclude much of contemporary Europe. According to Vice President JD Vance, the European Union is facing 'civilizational erasure'. Phrases like 'Christian identity' are used to mark a difference between the MAGA version of the West and a supposedly decadent Europe.

Trump has openly celebrated the election victories of the hard right against centrist parties in Germany. For Chancellor Friedrich Merz, a dyed-in-the-wool transatlanticist, it is bewildering to see the US president cheering for regime change in Europe.

This crisis goes deeper than the old disputes about burden-sharing in NATO. The Trump administration had a point in criticizing European free-riding in the alliance. That reproach was not new. Trump's predecessors had said as much.

The schism in the West is about more than just Trump

But, while the Bush and Obama administrations voiced the same complaints, they never questioned the Western alliance per se. Trump, by contrast, has threatened to let Russia's President Vladimir Putin do 'whatever the hell he wants' with Europe. For him, NATO is a tool of coercion – not so much against enemies but against allies. The threat can be summed up like this: If you are not aligned with us on issues like tariffs, Greenland or the regulation of US tech companies, who knows if we will be there for you in an emergency?

The schism in the West is about more than just Trump. At its core is a disagreement about how to order an increasingly disorderly world. It is about the right course between sovereignty and cooperation, between freedom of trade and protectionism.

For Europe, and maybe most urgently for Germany as a country that has thrived on the open, rules-based order of the last decades, the challenge boils down to this: If you want to keep at least some degree of that order, what are you prepared to do to sustain it? How can you survive as a middle power in a world of rule-breakers? Ganging up with other middle powers, as Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney has suggested, might be part of the

solution. But this idea is not viable as an exclusively Western club.

Germany must defend its values and interests more vigorously, even if it means doing so without or against the current US government. This will not be easy because of increasing domestic constraints. Recent electoral victories by anti-West parties on the hard right and the hard left put pressure on Merz's foreign policy. These parties propose their versions of 'Germany first': cut funding for Ukraine and defence spending, and spend the money at home.

German extremists find their ideas supported by the Trump administration, which seems open to trading away Ukrainian sovereignty for normalization with Russia. Supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and calling out Russian war crimes remains the right course for Germany's government, but this might soon be a lonely stance, under pressure from home and abroad.

A grave mistake for Berlin to stay mute while Gaza was pulverized

At the same time, international law must not be invoked only when our enemies break it. It was a grave mistake for Berlin to stay mute while Gaza was pulverized by Israel in response to the atrocities of 7 October 2023. And it is rightly seen as hypocritical when Germany's government condemns Russia's land-grab in Donbas while saying almost nothing against Israel's occupation of ever more territory in the West Bank.

The same goes for the Iran war. Calling the illegal Israeli and US military campaign necessary 'dirty work' was an error of judgement by Merz. He later distanced himself from the disastrous war, but in the eyes of many in the Global South, it was just another instance of double standards by Western powers.

Germany must learn from the sobering experience that Europe's security crisis is not of great concern for many countries in other parts of the world. India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar rightly observed that Europe and the West need to move past the mindset that their problems are the world's problems.

An opportunity to present a humbler West to the world

Liberty, self-government and universal human rights are contested in every single Western nation. The days of Western lecturing and hectoring of the 'rest' are over, and that is a welcome development. The debate within the Western family of countries gives Europe a chance to chart a different course. Trump's global bullying is an opportunity to present a humbler West to the world.

37% of Germans say the West still exists as a united entity.

Order does not spring from domination but from cooperation and pooled sovereignty. Other parts of the world may accept this idea – by example, not by compulsion. But first it must be preserved. Germany has a vital role to play in keeping Europe together, not as a hegemon but as a 'servant-leader' in the middle.

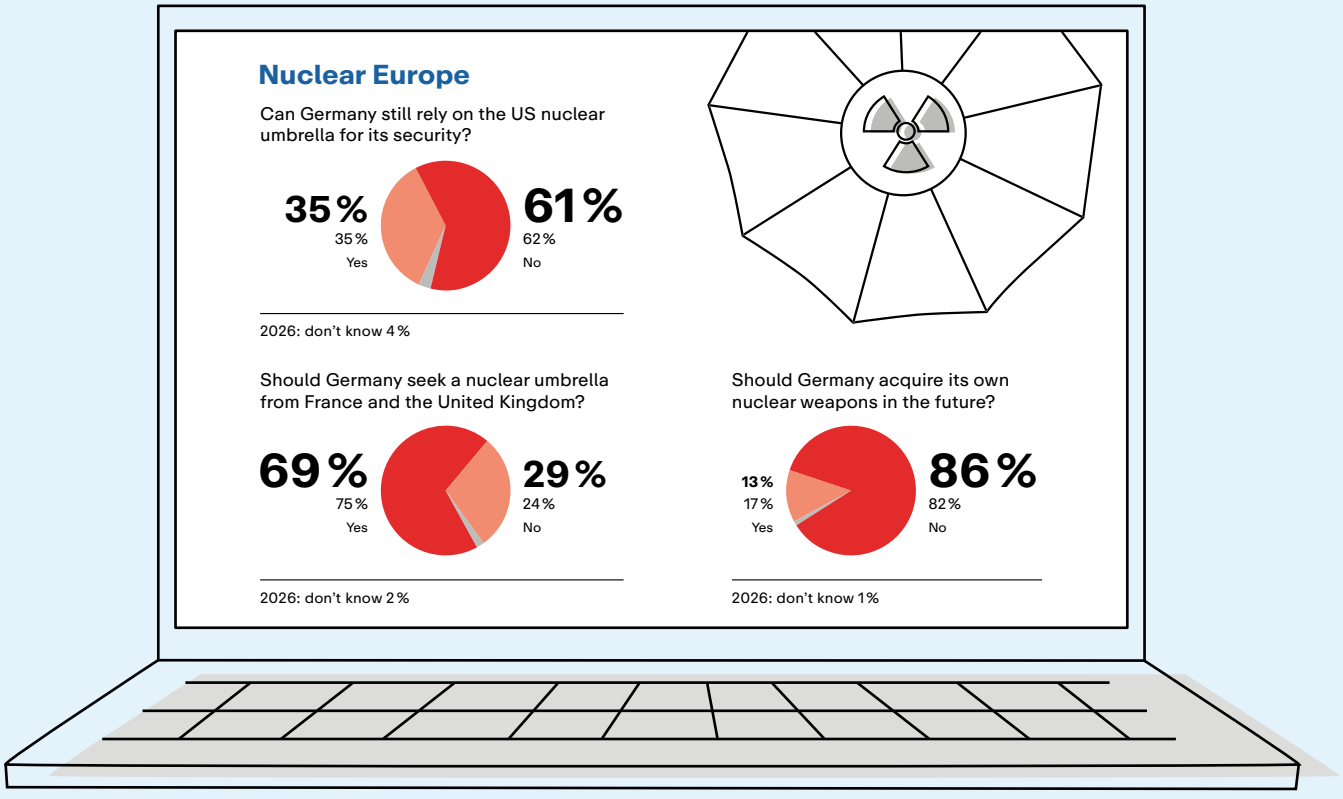
Belgium's Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak famously used to say: 'There are only two types of states in Europe: small states and small states that have not yet realized they are small.' In the face of today's global challenges, maybe that aphorism applies to all states in the world. ↖



Jörg Lau
is international correspondent at DIE ZEIT.

Our New Website Is Live

Who should protect Germany:
the United States, its own neighbours or itself?



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theberlinpulse.org



The Vacuum the Extremes Are Filling

By neglecting the public's desire for peace, the political centre has left a vacuum that the BSW and AfD are exploiting, warns Nicole Deitelhoff.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, pundits repeatedly announced the return of a West once pronounced dead. With President Joe Biden, one of the last committed transatlanticists sat in the White House, ready to confront Russian aggression alongside Europe. That moment now feels distant. Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025 has drained this commitment. Washington has sharply scaled back its support for Ukraine, and evidence of its retreat from transatlantic cooperation has become unmistakable: military threats against NATO ally Denmark over Greenland, punishing tariffs and threats against the European Union, the withdrawal of US troops and equipment from Europe, and repeated hedging on alliance solidarity. European capitals are right to ask whether the United States can still be relied upon, and also whether the West still holds as a political category at all.

Anti-American sentiment is also rising within European societies. In Germany, this is visible in the popularity of parties at both ends of the spectrum. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and on the left Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) and parts of Die Linke have gained partly by questioning support for Ukraine and, through this, Germany's traditional alignment with the West. Despite its admiration for Trump and Elon Musk, the AfD has long cultivated an anti-US tone: the prominent party figure Björn Höcke has claimed western Germany no longer has 'real Germans,' only 'German-speaking Americans'. Die Linke's programme calls for NATO's dissolution while the BSW is, in effect, a single-issue party, founded

61% of Germans say Germany and Europe are not doing enough to promote peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.

on opposing Western support for Ukraine and demanding reconciliation with Russia.

These positions have found growing support in recent state elections. That support is also not simply a reaction to Trump. It also reflects a vacuum left by Germany's centrist parties in the post-Ukraine invasion pivot in security and defence policy. Whatever one makes of its record, the *Zeitenwende* narrowed public debate to the technical question of which weapons to send Ukraine and how much Germany should spend on rearmament. Questions of a sustainable peace strategy were largely left in the dark. In that vacuum, the AfD and BSW seized on a genuine problem: they take seriously a longing for peace and a fear of escalation, and offer a simple answer amid growing complexity: Peace now! And they blame the West for its absence.

The recent state election results should worry centrists

Is the West finished as a political community, then? Not necessarily. Germany's Ukraine debate is highly polarized, but that maps onto older cleavages. Particularly, the one between libertarian-pluralist vs. authoritarian populist attitudes plays out here, dividing the population into those who are open to cultural diversity, migration and international cooperation and those who perceive of these dynamics as threats.

In fact, polling on defence spending still shows majority support for it. The recent state election results should worry centrists but they do not mean a wholesale rejection of the West. Centrists still hold the tools to blunt the appeal of fringe parties, at least in foreign and security policy, by explicitly embedding the Zeitenwende within a long-term peace strategy and making that case publicly, closing the gap they left open.

A strategy must envision a fair balance of interests in a lasting peace order.

A long-term strategy must envision declining violence and growing cooperation, leading towards a fair balance of interests in a lasting peace order. While the first phase is about fending off present violence through rearmament and arms deliveries, it points towards a second one of peaceful coexistence, by pairing rearmament with offers to negotiate its limits: no first-strike options, caps on weapons systems, and reliable communication channels. Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul's recent meeting with his Russian counterpart was instrumental in demonstrating to the public that, contrary to Russia's claims or those of the political fringes, the government aims for diplomacy and peace.

Polling numbers on specific policy issues do not answer the deeper question of what the West can be if the United States turns its back on its partners. The answer lies in returning to what the term originally meant. The West was never primarily determined by geography, but a community bound by shared values: broadly speaking, a commitment to democracy, freedom and human rights. That is why it always included states outside the geographic West, such as Japan and South Korea, and why it was never free of internal conflict. It was never a tight corset, but a space open to argument and differing interpretations. That was visible in numerous conflicts, notably over the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Whether the West survives will not be decided in Washington

When one member of this community, however central to its founding, turns against its shared values, that country may place itself outside it but cannot destroy it single-handedly. A West without the United States' full weight might be a weaker geopolitical actor, but whether it survives as a political community is a different question – one that will be answered not in Washington but in Berlin, Paris, Seoul and Tokyo. Only the West's remaining members can dissolve it, by failing to grasp that it has always been what its members made of it, and that keeping it alive is their task at home and internationally. ↖



Nicole Deitelhoff
is executive director of the Leibniz Peace Research Institute Frankfurt.



‘We are treating a ceasefire as peace’

Gaza: An end to the fighting is not the same thing as peace and another harsh winter is looming. Can Europe make a difference?

Körber-Stiftung: The old multilateral order appears to be completely overthrown. Where did you feel the ground shifting most clearly during your career?
Sigrid Kaag: Erosion is gradual. You only notice it once the trend has already taken hold. This predates recent events by a decade or more, as countries turned inward, populist politics started to recast international institutions as a burden rather than a safeguard for peace and stability.

What did that shift look like for you in Gaza?
I’ve worked in Gaza since 1988, in different roles. It’s hard to witness the near-total destruction of a place where nearly two million people are struggling just to survive, though the same could be said of Sudan and other places outside the media’s lens. For the Global South, this erosion isn’t new; they’ll tell you the order was always duplicitous, built on double standards. The weakest link is international law, which depends on the moral courage of leaders and the willingness of states to uphold it.

What about distrust in the United Nations?
That depends on who you ask. Israel was distrustful of the UN even before the abhorrent terror attack of 7 October. The Palestinians, stateless and living under occupation for decades, want the UN to be a stronger player.

You left your UN roles as senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza and as special coordinator for the Middle East Peace process last year and joined the Gaza Executive Board. Why?
I concluded my UN mission in 2025, by which point it had become somewhat of a legacy mission. Israel is critical at the UN politically, which limited the scope of what it could achieve. Following the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2803 …

which endorsed the 20-point Gaza peace plan and set out a comprehensive framework for post-conflict governance, security and reconstruction
… I was asked to join the Gaza Executive Board, based on the trust of the different parties. This is an independent, unpaid advisory role. I always try to contribute where I can in situations like this, but neither naively nor, sadly, with particularly high expectations.

When was the last time you were in Gaza?
I haven't been since I concluded my UN role in 2025. More generally, Israel does not allow civilians to enter Gaza.

Seats at the table on Middle East peace have gone to the United States and regional powers, not Europe. Does Europe need to play a role?
More mediators are involved today than in the past, including regional powers, which is healthy and important. But Europe specifically lacks unity of purpose: you can't be a player if you're not strong, united and focused. That's about more than paperwork; it's about acting as one when it matters. We've seen a united European response when it comes to the war against Ukraine, but even there national interests can override a unified strategy. As a former pro-Europe party leader, I'd like Europe to play a greater role. It isn't there yet, especially in the eyes of the Global South.

How do you see Germany's role in conflicts like this?
Germany is one of the EU's big players and a considered, deliberate partner on reconstruction. But Europe cannot do without a strongly engaged Germany. Domestic politics can be either a hindrance or an accelerator. The more a country turns inwards, the more its international voice is muted.

Back to Gaza. According to the UN Satellite Centre, about 81 per cent of Gaza's structures have been damaged. How much is needed for reconstruction?
The initial estimate was around $71 billion, and that figure will rise. Gaza has been deliberately turned into a wasteland. But the bigger question isn't money; it's the absence of political progress: negotiations on disarming Hamas have stalled, and the Israeli armed forces still occupy about 60 per cent of the strip. Civilians pay the price every day.

Who can actually apply pressure for political progress?
Real pressure has to come from the US presidency. It's always been that way in this conflict. When the Biden administration reviewed some arms shipments to Israel during the war in 2024, we saw traction on the humanitarian front immediately. But with the conflict with Iran continuing as we speak, and with the absence of progress so far in the Ukraine negotiations, one could also argue that the US administration has other priorities. And particularly in the case of Israel and Hamas, things need constant real-time pressure from the highest levels. Europe is unfortunately not playing a primary role here.

Are you afraid of a decade of inaction once attention moves on?
I still believe the only viable outcome is to have both security for Israel and the realization of Palestinian rights. What worries me is that we've normalized treating a ceasefire as peace. Reducing real negotiations to transactional, short-term deals is a recipe that is doomed to fail.

How optimistic are you for the winter ahead?
I don't hold my breath. People are still living in tents and, as the *Economist* put it in April, 'only rats are free to roam'. It's on our collective conscience as an international community.

What can ordinary citizens do?
Keep the topic alive. Donate. Exercise political pressure. In a free Europe, we have the right to demand concrete action. The fact that Europe isn't acting is also a choice. Inaction is also a choice. ↖

The interview was conducted on 28 September 2026 by Lilli Blank and Jonathan Lehrer.

Sigrid Kaag
is a member of the Gaza Executive Board.

The Berlin Pulse Survey 2026/2027

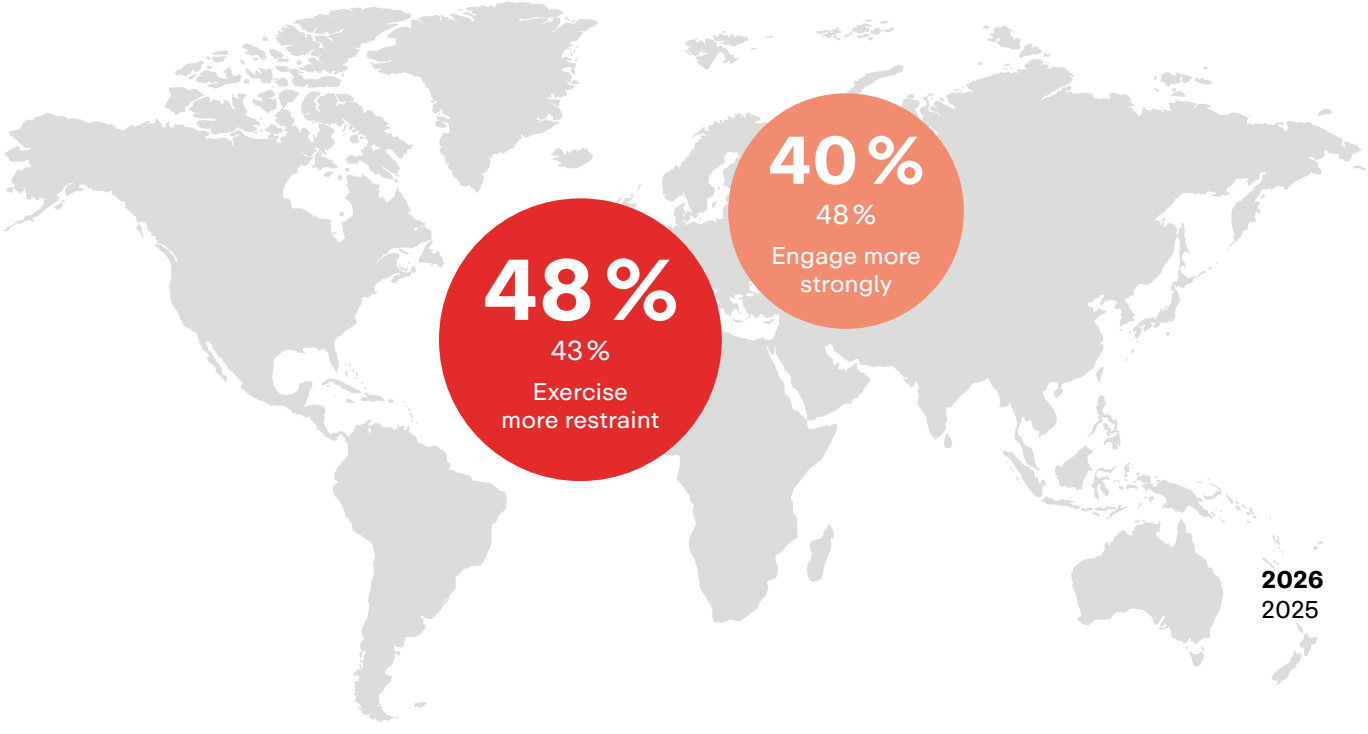
A representative survey on German and US attitudes to foreign policy commissioned by Körber-Stiftung

All US results by Pew Research Center September 2026

Germany in the World

Retreat over engagement

Should Germany engage more strongly on international crises or exercise more restraint?



Of those who favour more engagement: Should Germany become more strongly engaged militarily, diplomatically or financially?

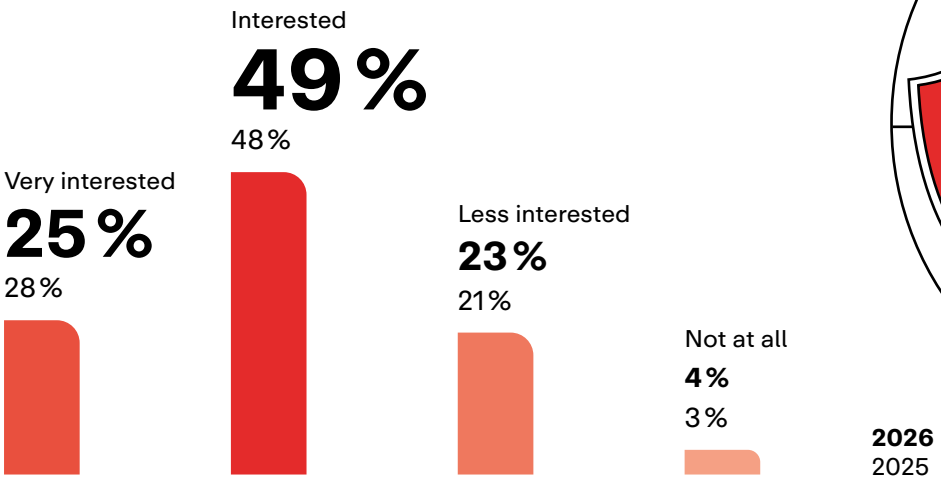
77 % Diplomatically
13 % Militarily
7 % Financially

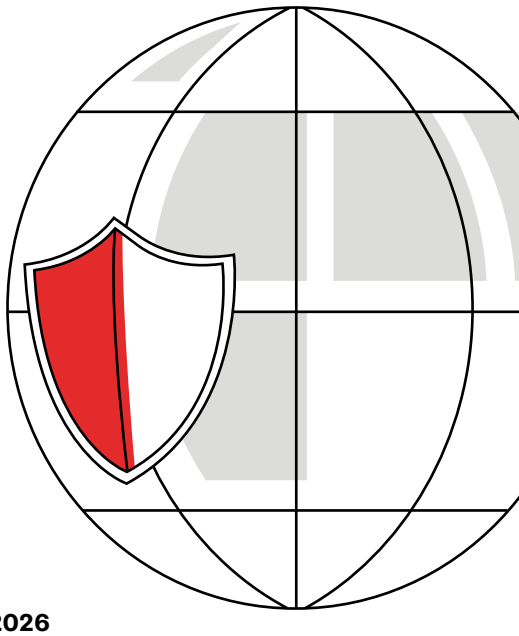
2026: spontaneously: none of the above 11%, don't know 1% | 2026: spontaneously: none of the above 2%

Compare with results from 2025/26

Foreign policy matters

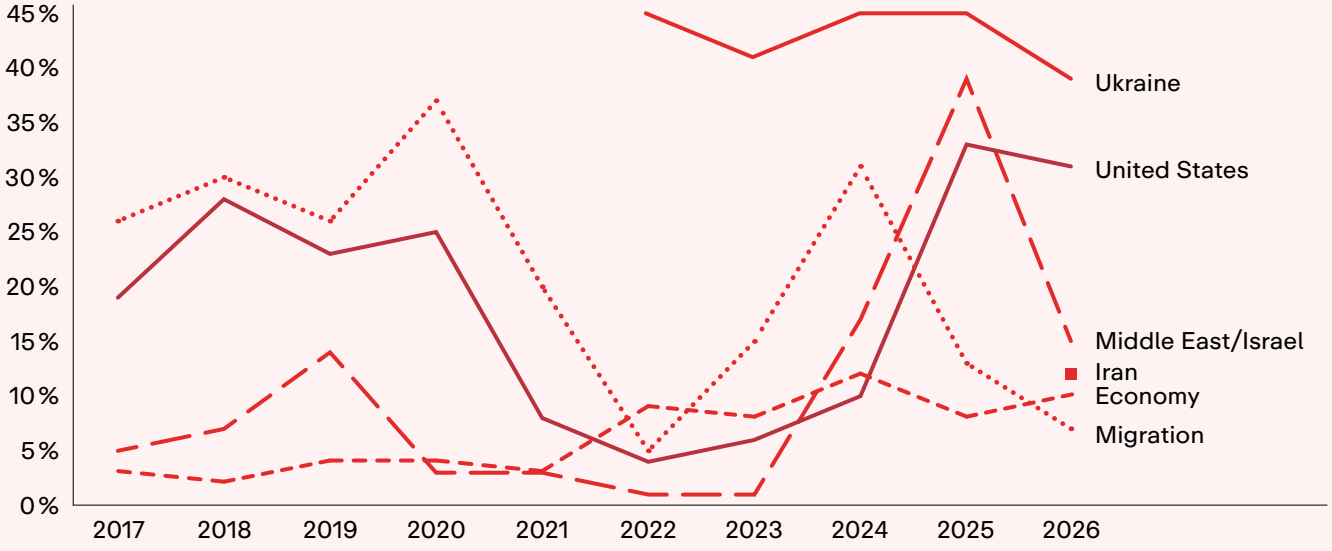
How interested are you in foreign and security policy?





Biggest challenges: Ukraine and the United States

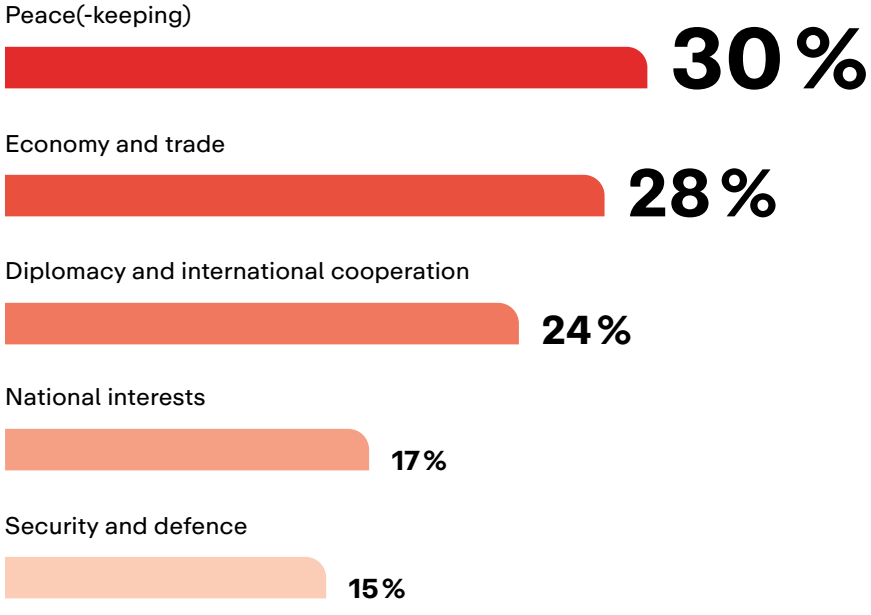
What are the greatest challenges currently facing German foreign policy?



2026: don't know 7 %, no answer 2 %

Desire for peace

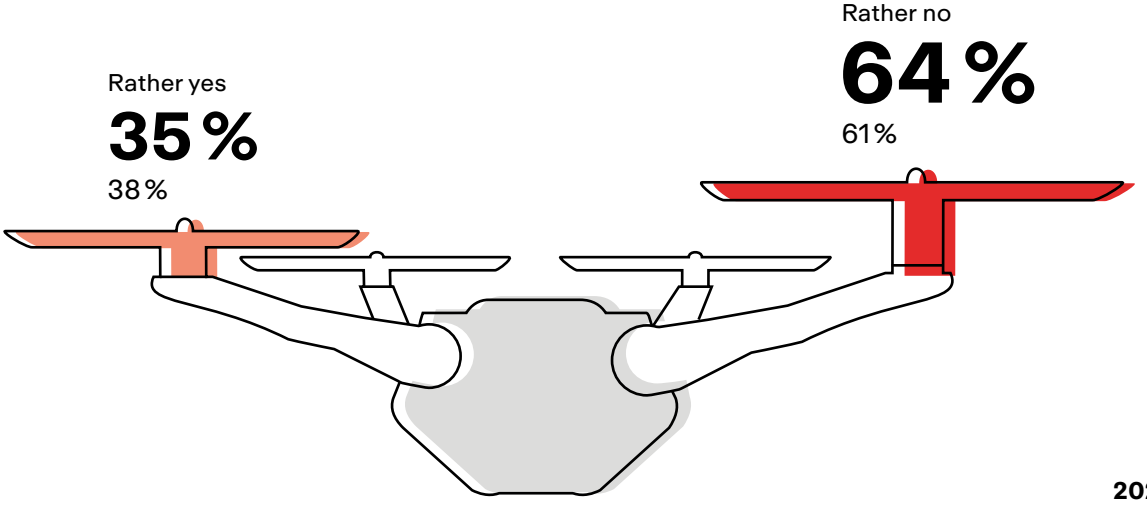
What should be the most important priorities of German foreign policy?



2026: don't know 9 %, no answer 2 %

No to military leadership

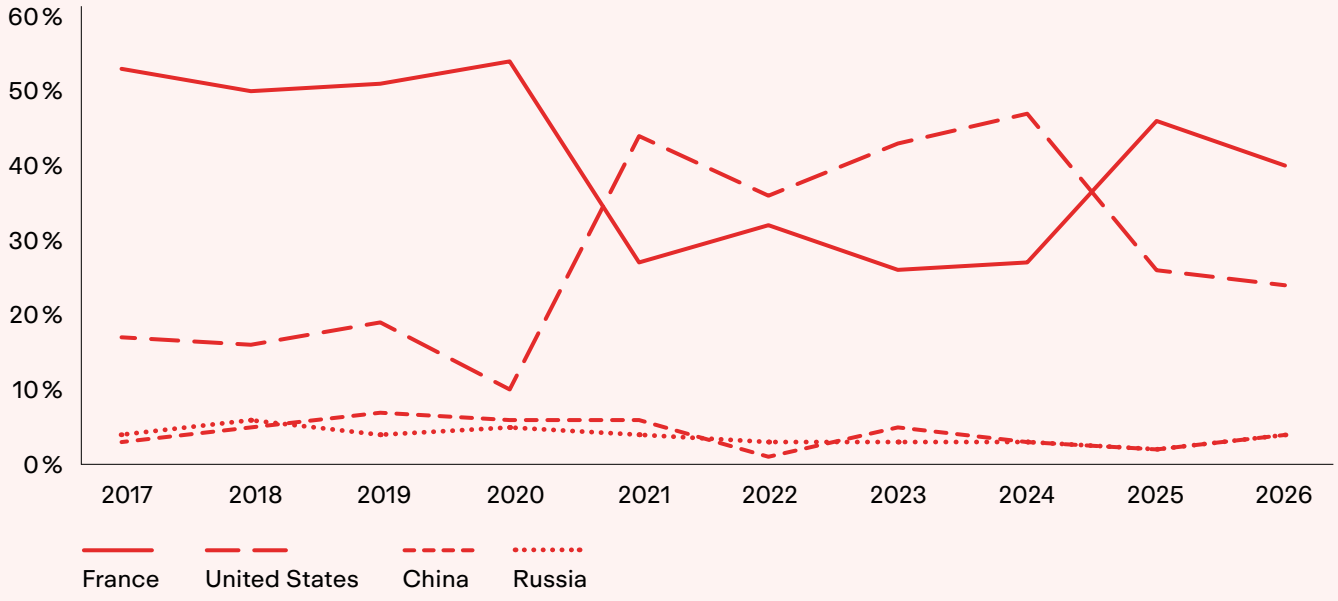
Should Germany play a military leadership role in Europe?



2026: don't know 1 %

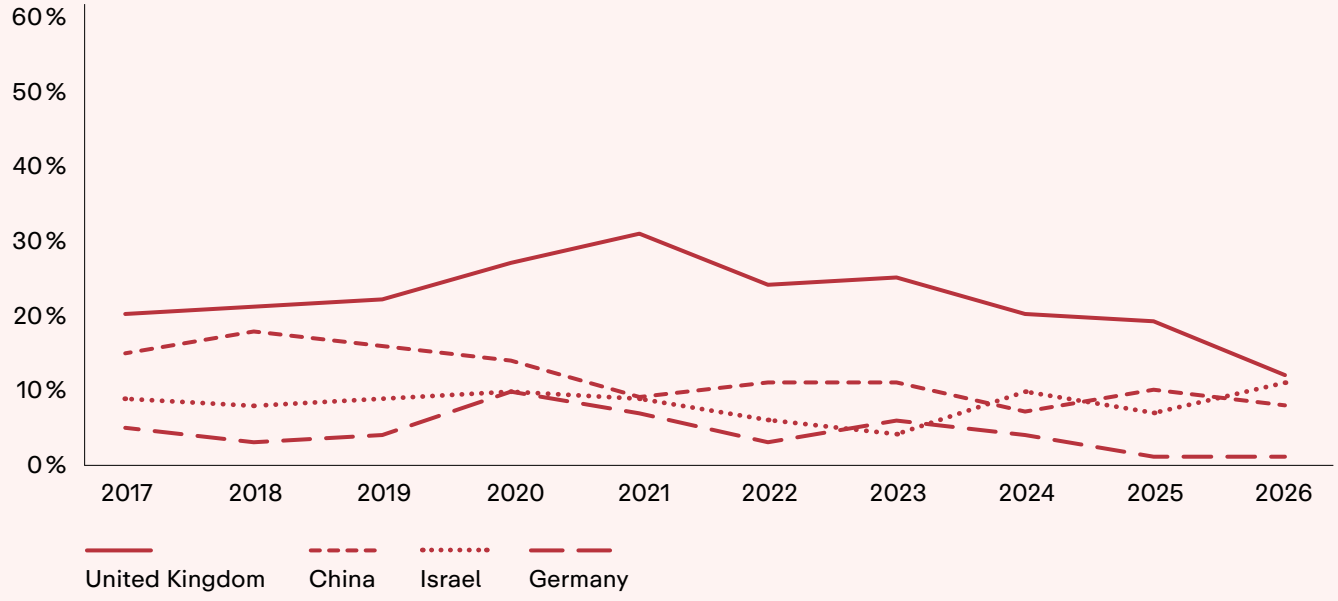
Fading US role

German respondents:
Which country is currently the most important partner for Germany?



German respondents, 2026: don't know 12 %, no answer 2 %

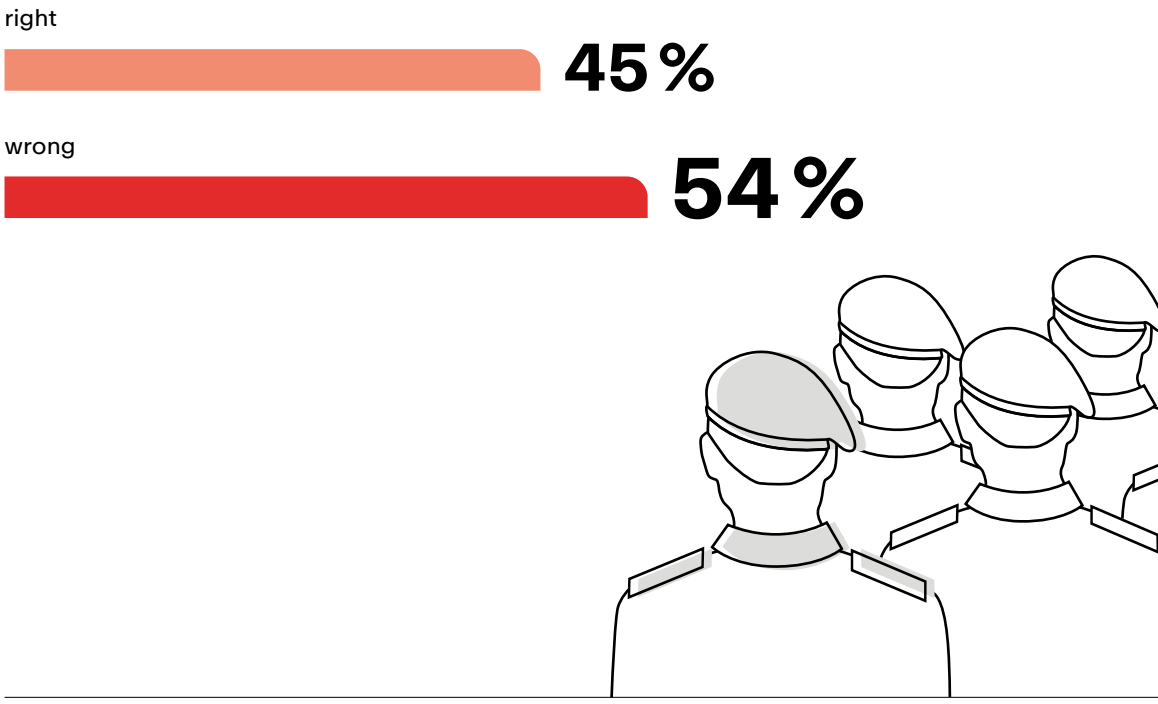
US respondents:
Which country is currently the most important partner for the United States?



US respondents, 2026: don't know/no answer 38 %

Germans uneasy about military might

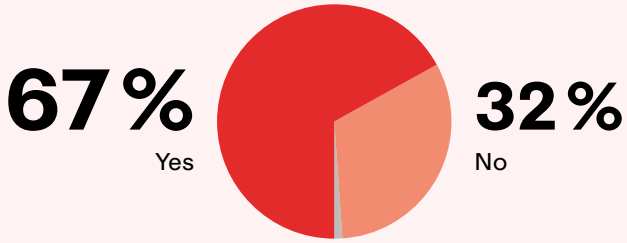
Germany wants to make the Bundeswehr the strongest army in Europe. Is this target ...



2026: don't know 1%

Understanding neighbours' unease

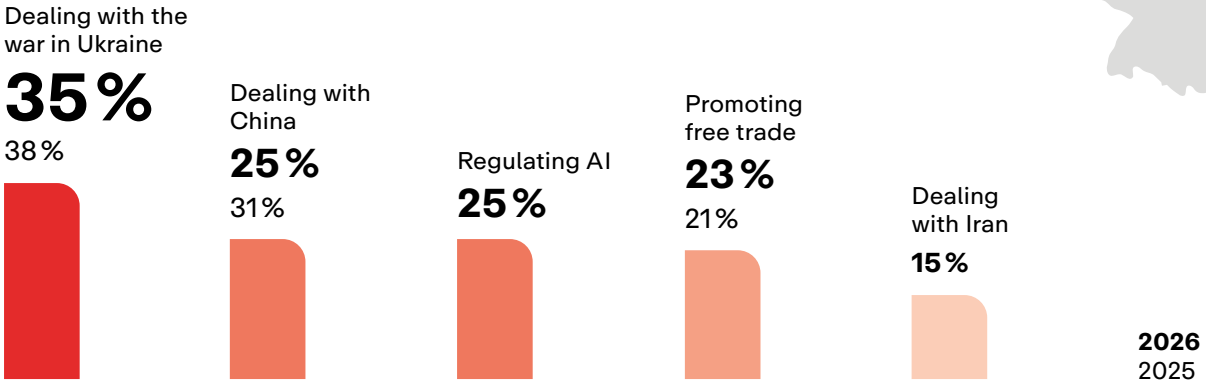
Do you understand why some European countries are concerned about Germany's military growth?



Transatlantic Relations

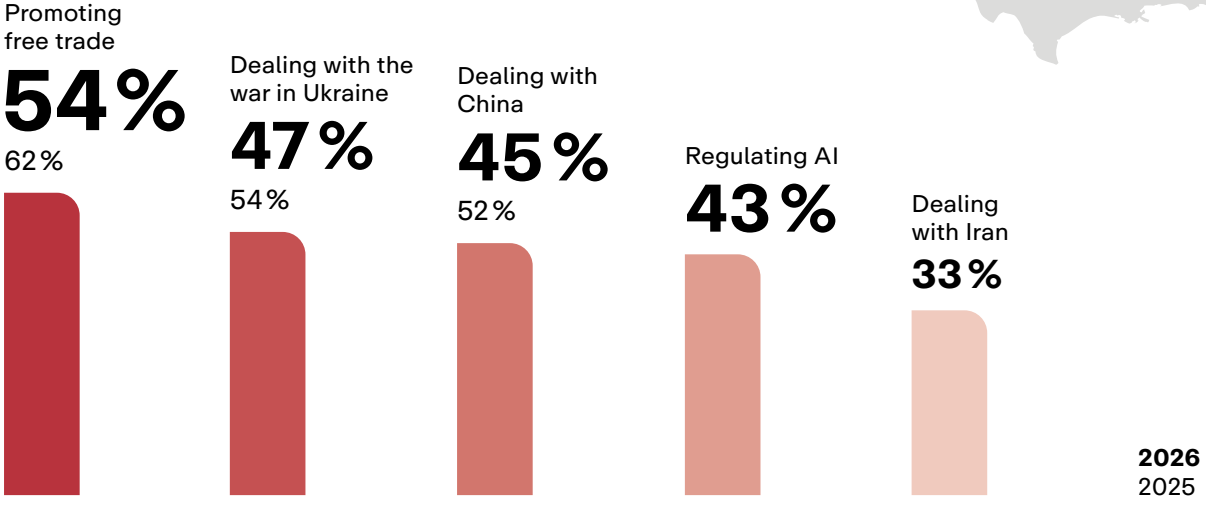
Shrinking transatlantic common ground

German respondents:
Do you see the United States as a partner on these issues?



German respondents, 2026: answer 'neither' ranged from 6 to 10 per cent for all issues, 'don't know' ranged from 1 to 4 per cent for all issues

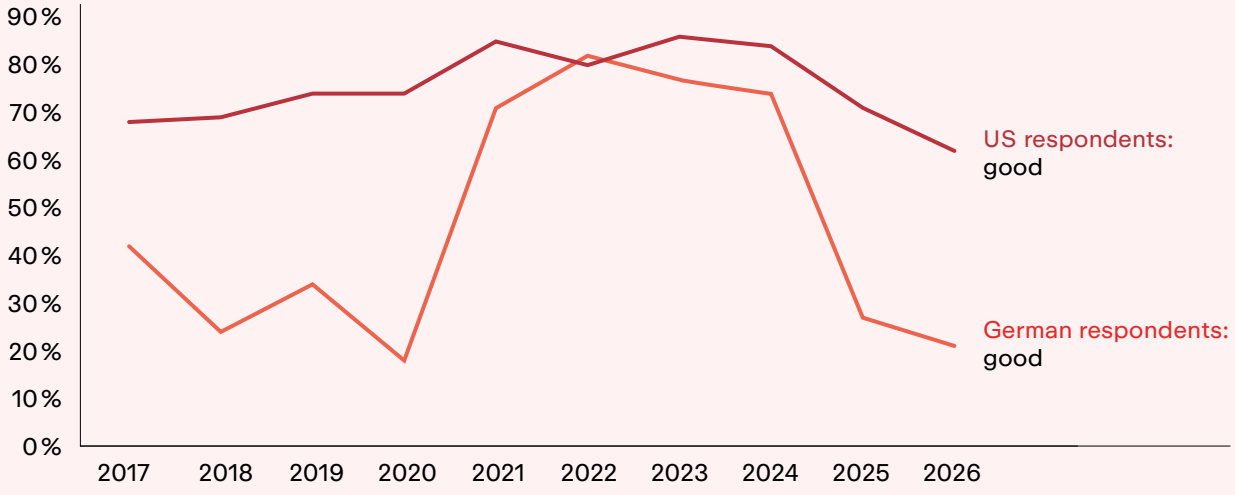
US respondents:
Do you see Germany as a partner on these issues?



US respondents, 2026: answer 'don't know/no answer' ranged from 10 to 11 per cent for all issues

Pessimism across the Atlantic

How would you rate the current relations between Germany and the United States?



German respondents, 2026: bad 77 %, don't know 1 % | US respondents, 2026: bad 33 %, don't know/no answer 5 %

US military bases still important

How important are US military bases in Germany for your country's national security?

German respondents:

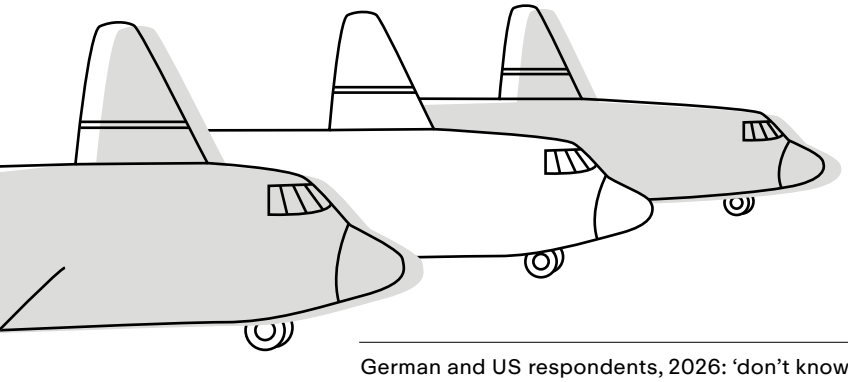
Important **64 %**

Not important **35 %**

US respondents:

Important **80 %**

Not important **15 %**

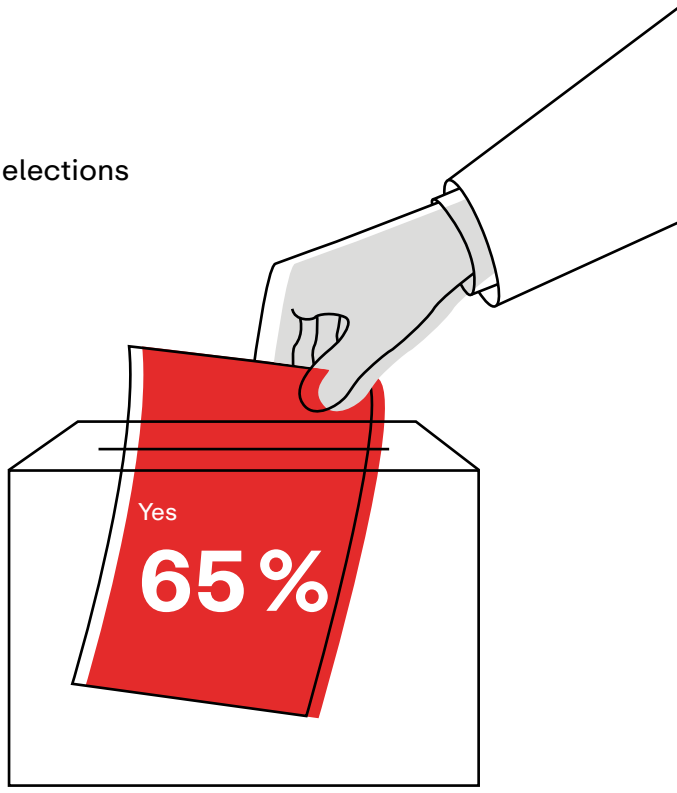


German and US respondents, 2026: 'don't know/no answer' ranged from 1 to 5 per cent for all issues

Trust in US democracy

Will the United States still be a democracy with free elections and equal rights for all citizens in five years?

No
32 %

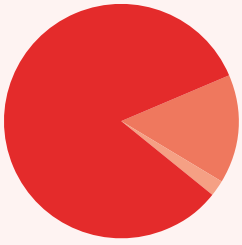


2026: don't know 3 %, no answer 1 %

A non-aligned Germany

How should Germany position itself amid growing Chinese-US rivalry?

83 %
Neutral



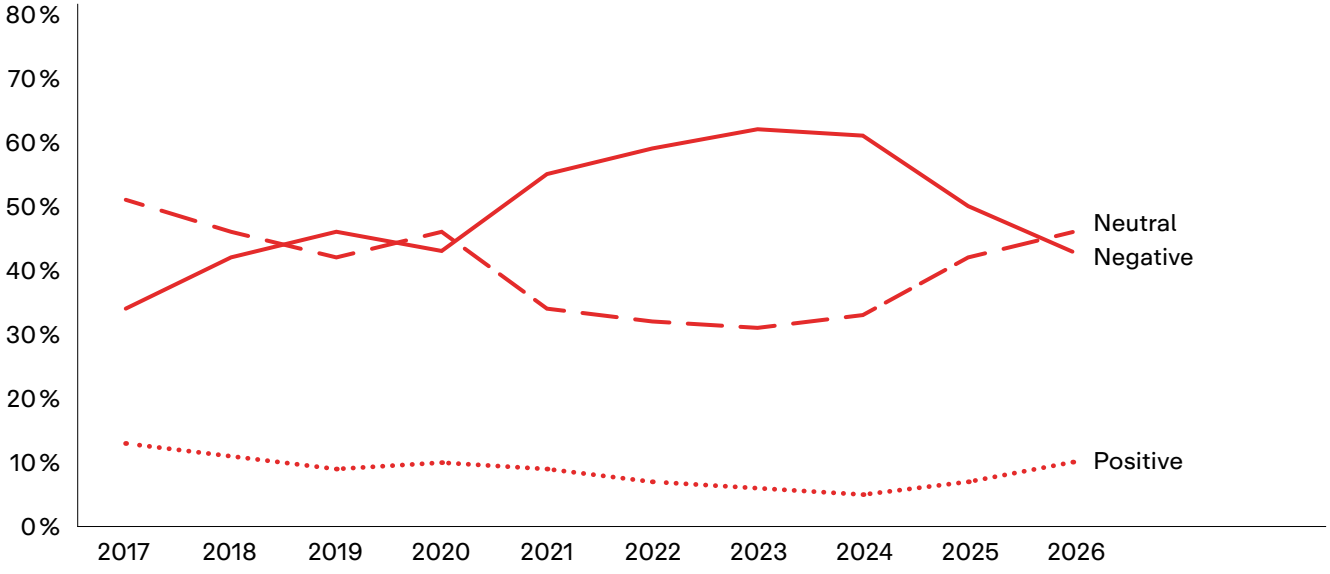
15 %
US side

2 %
Chinese side

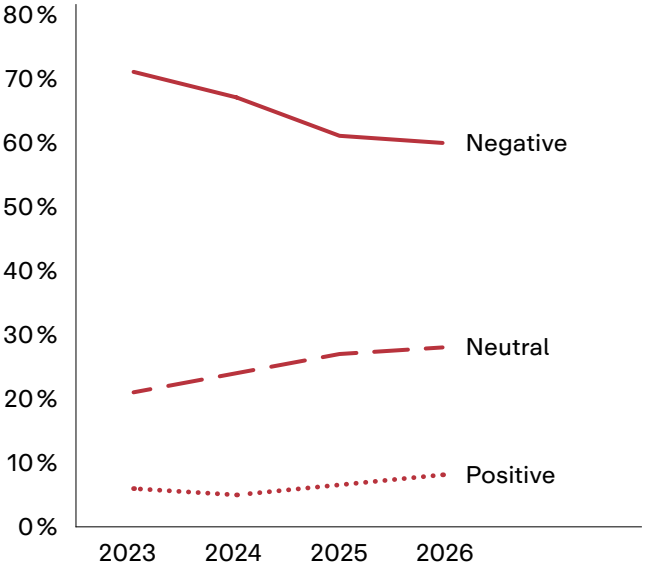
China

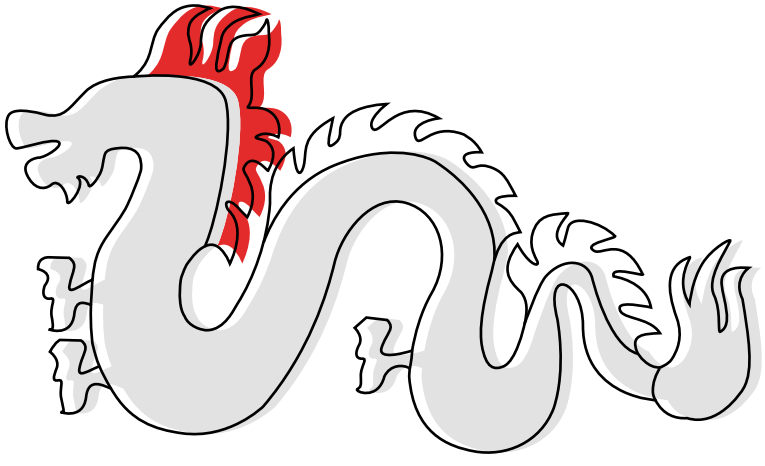
Softening stance on China

German respondents:
How do you see China's rising influence?



US respondents:
How do you see China's rising influence?



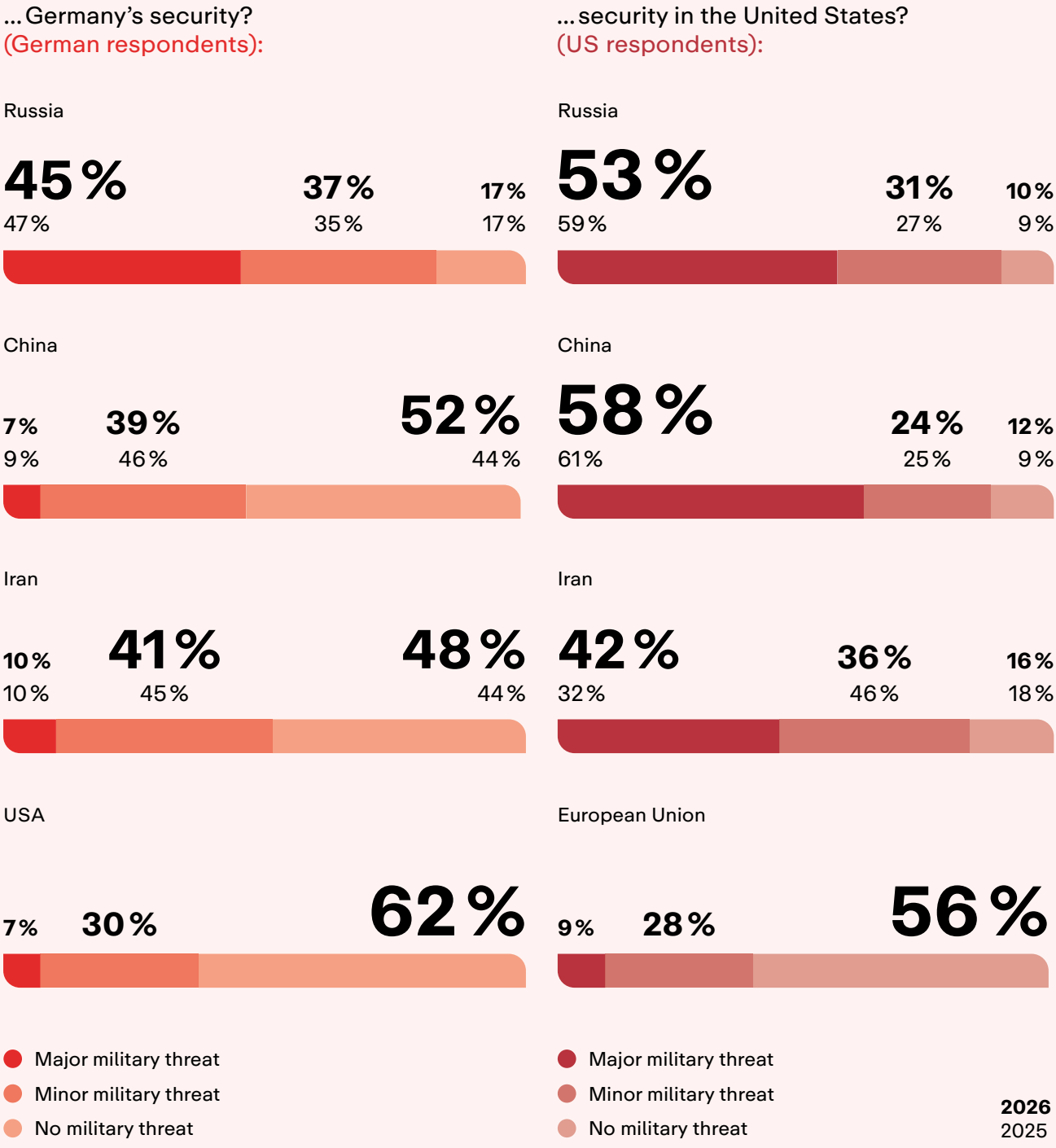


US, 2026: don't know/no answer 4 %

Perception of Threat

Russia seen as a threat

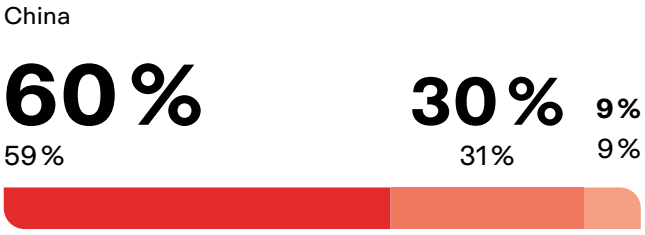
Do the following countries represent a military threat to…?

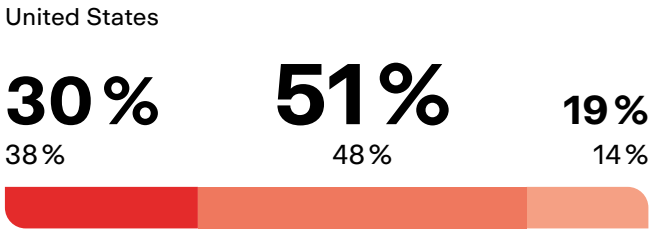


German and US respondents: 'don't know/no answer' ranged from 1 to 7 per cent for all issues

Economic rival China

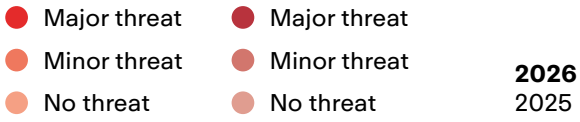
Do the following countries represent a major, a minor or no threat to Germany's economy? (German respondents):





Does China represent a major, a minor or no threat to the American economy? (US respondents):

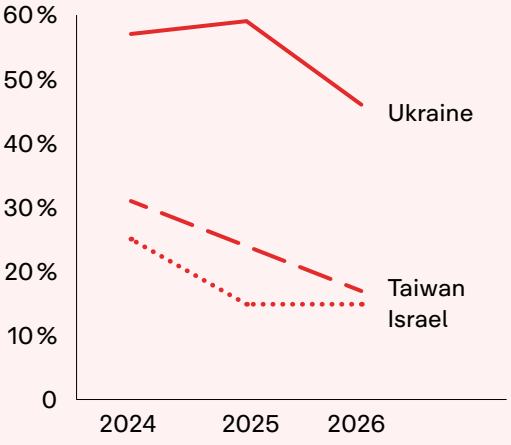




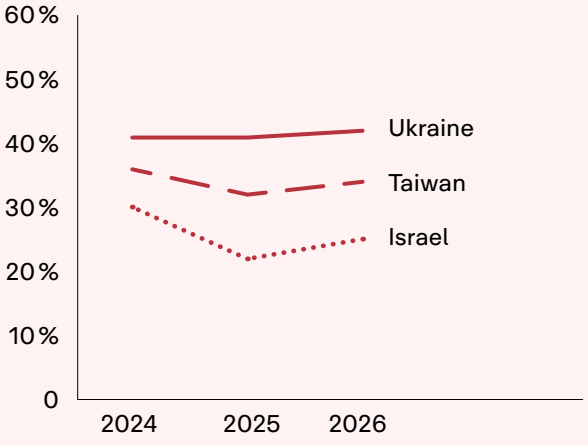
German and US respondents, 2026: 'don't know/no answer' ranged from 1 to 5 per cent for all issues

Support for Ukraine declines

German respondents:
Germany should provide military assistance to ...



US respondents:
The United States should provide military assistance to ...

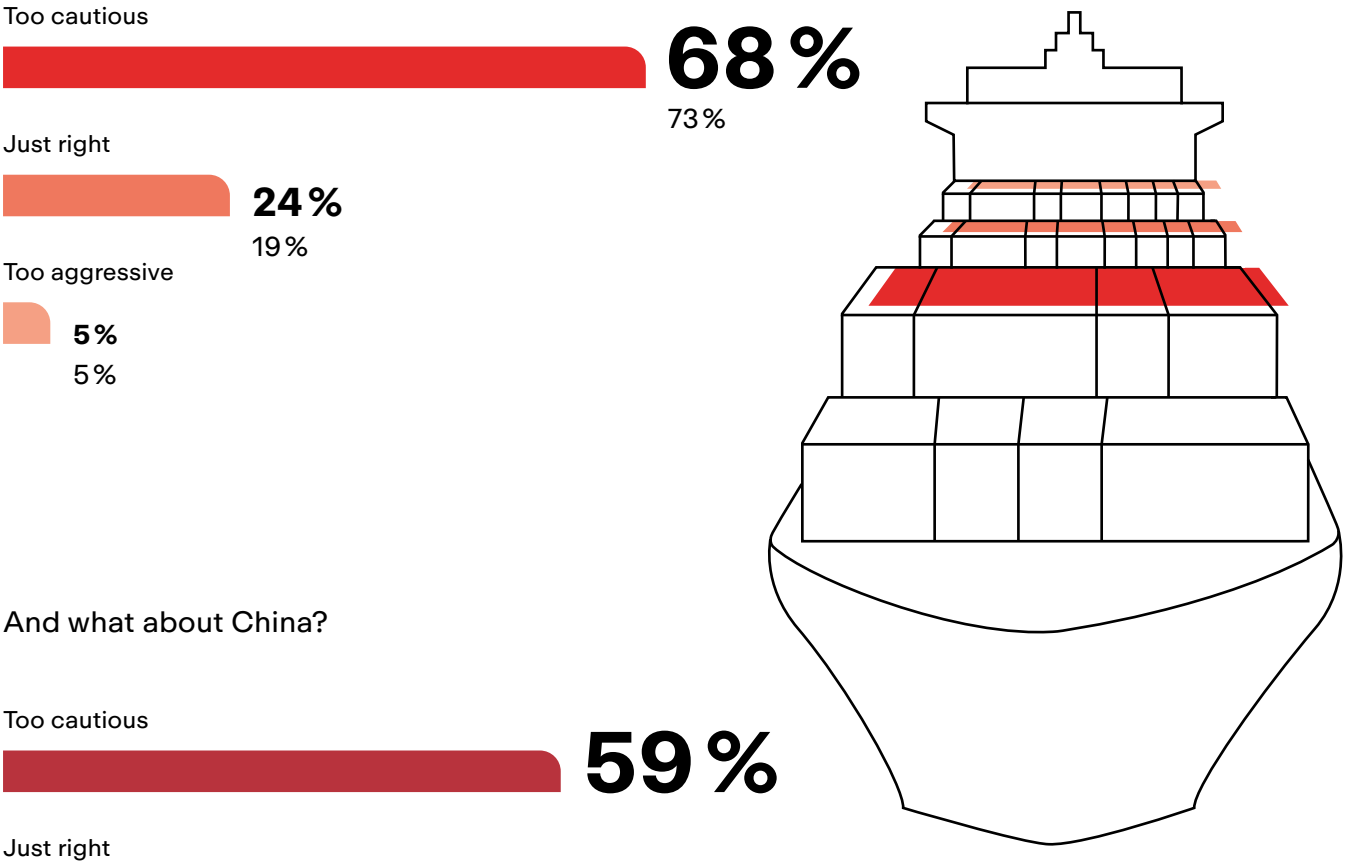


German respondents: 'don't know/no answer' ranged from 1 to 4 per cent for all issues | US respondents: 'not sure' ranged from 26 to 32 per cent for all issues; 'don't know/no answer' 4 %

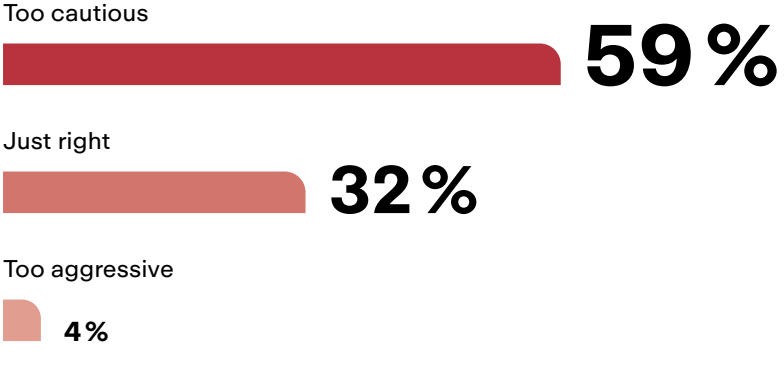
European Union

Stand up, Europe!

How do you assess Europe's approach to asserting its economic interests vis-à-vis the United States?



And what about China?

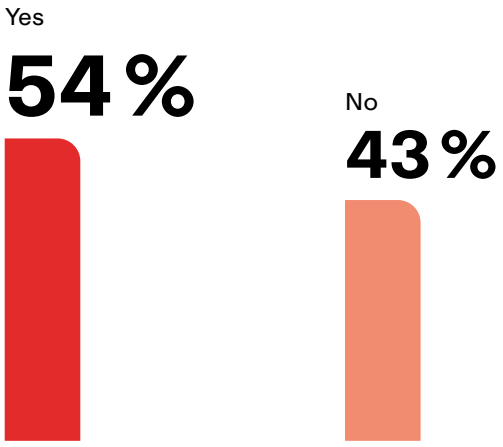


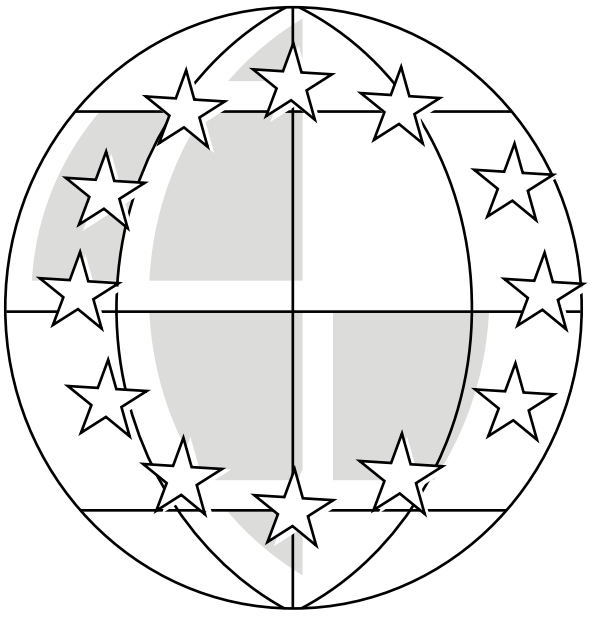
2026
2025

2026: 'don't know/no answer' ranged from 1 to 4 per cent for all issues

Europe can hold its own

Can the European Union hold its own between the United States and China?



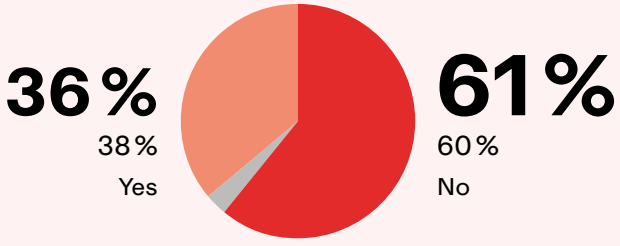


2026: don't know 3 %

Israel

Rethinking relations with Israel?

Does Germany bear a special historical and moral responsibility for Israel's security as a result of the Holocaust?



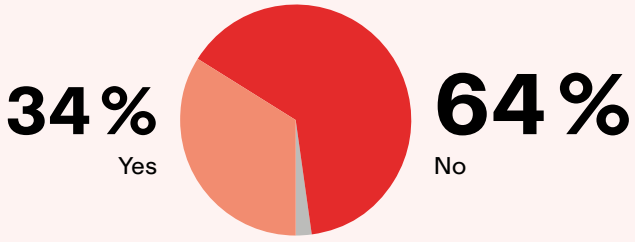
2026
2025

2026: don't know 2 %, no answer 1 %

Ukraine / Russia

No normalization with Russia

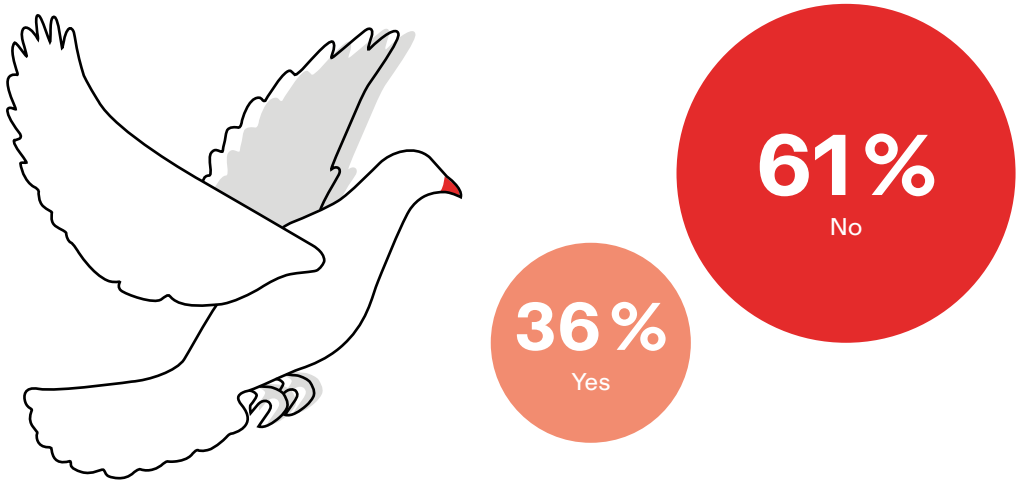
Should Germany begin to normalize its relations with Russia, for example, by easing sanctions or increasing energy imports?



2026: don't know 2 %

More diplomatic engagement please

Are Germany and Europe currently doing enough to promote peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine?



2026: don't know 3 %

Split on the response to Russia

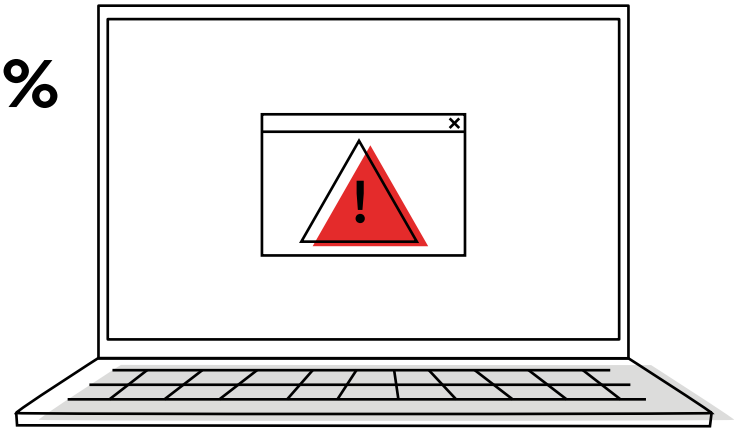
How should Germany respond to suspected Russian hybrid attacks, such as cyberattacks and sabotage?

Respond decisively with countermeasures

51 %

Avoid countermeasures to prevent escalation

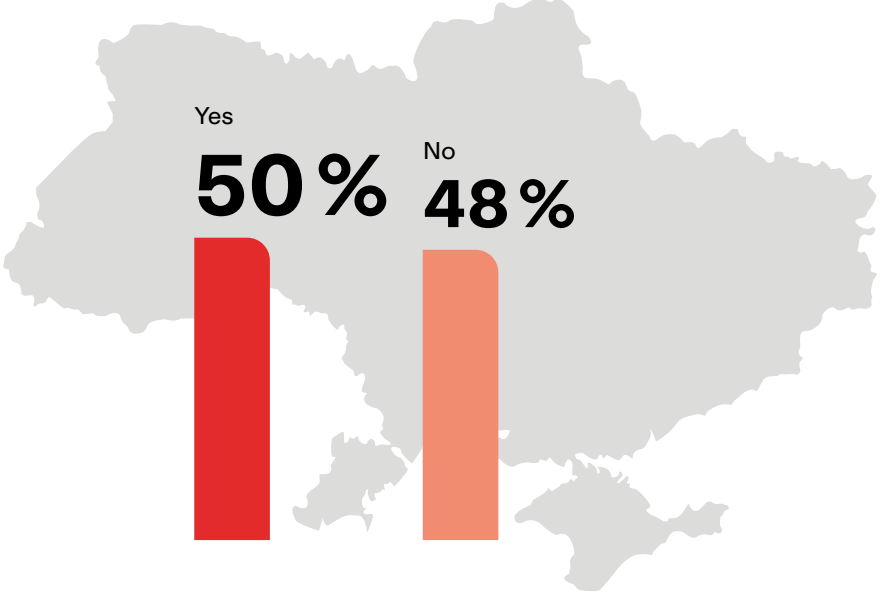
46 %



2026: don’t know 2 %, no answer 1 %

Defending Ukraine, defending Europe?

When Ukraine defends itself against Russia, does it also protect the security of Germany and Europe?



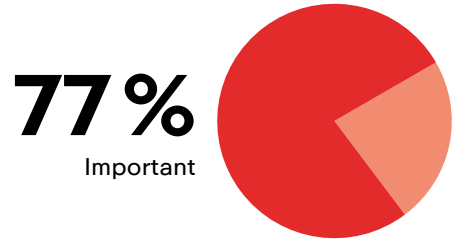
2026: don’t know 2 %

International Conflicts and Order

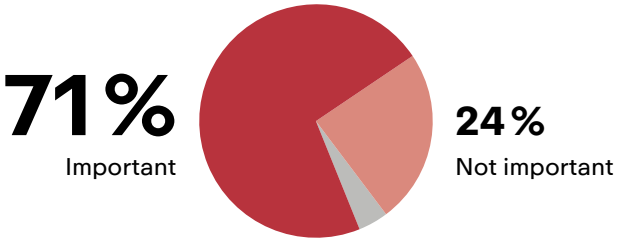
The UN still matters

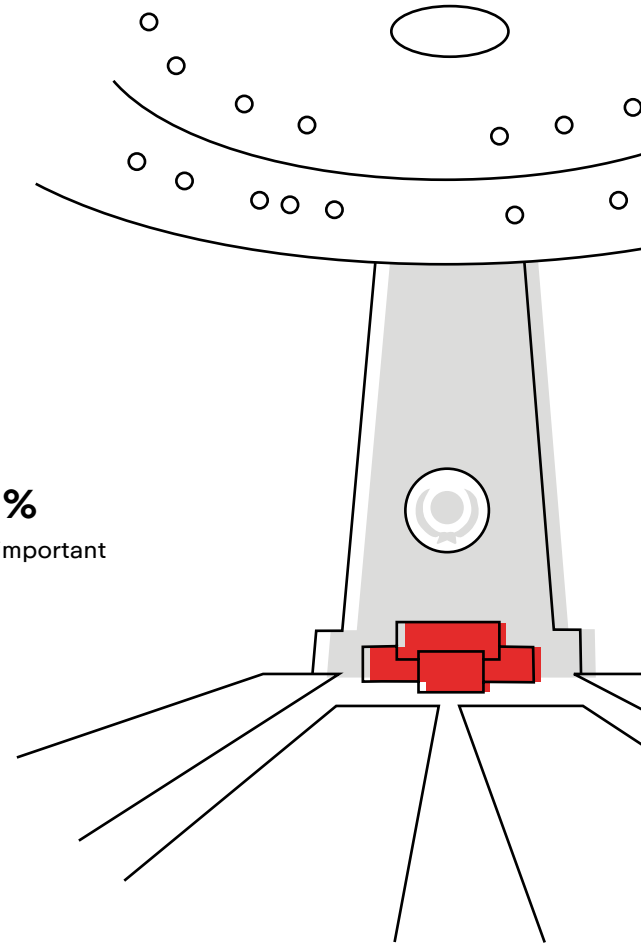
How important is the United Nations for resolving wars and conflicts around the world?

German respondents:



US respondents:

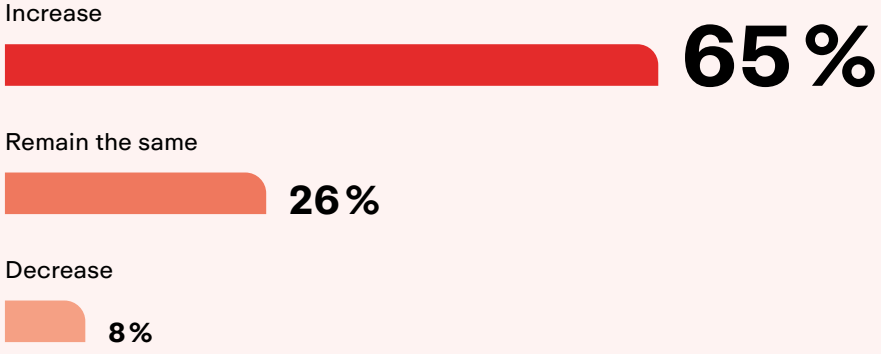




2026: ‘don’t know/no answer’ ranged from 0 to 4 per cent for all issues

More conflicts expected

How do you think military conflicts around the world will develop over the next five years?

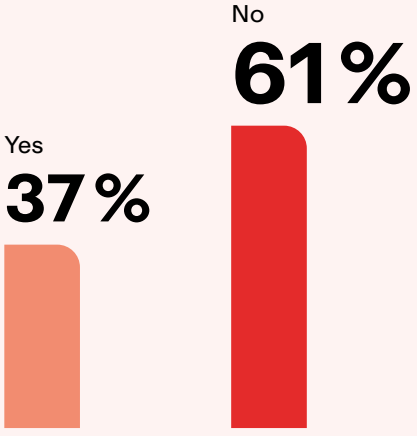


2026: don’t know 1%

The West

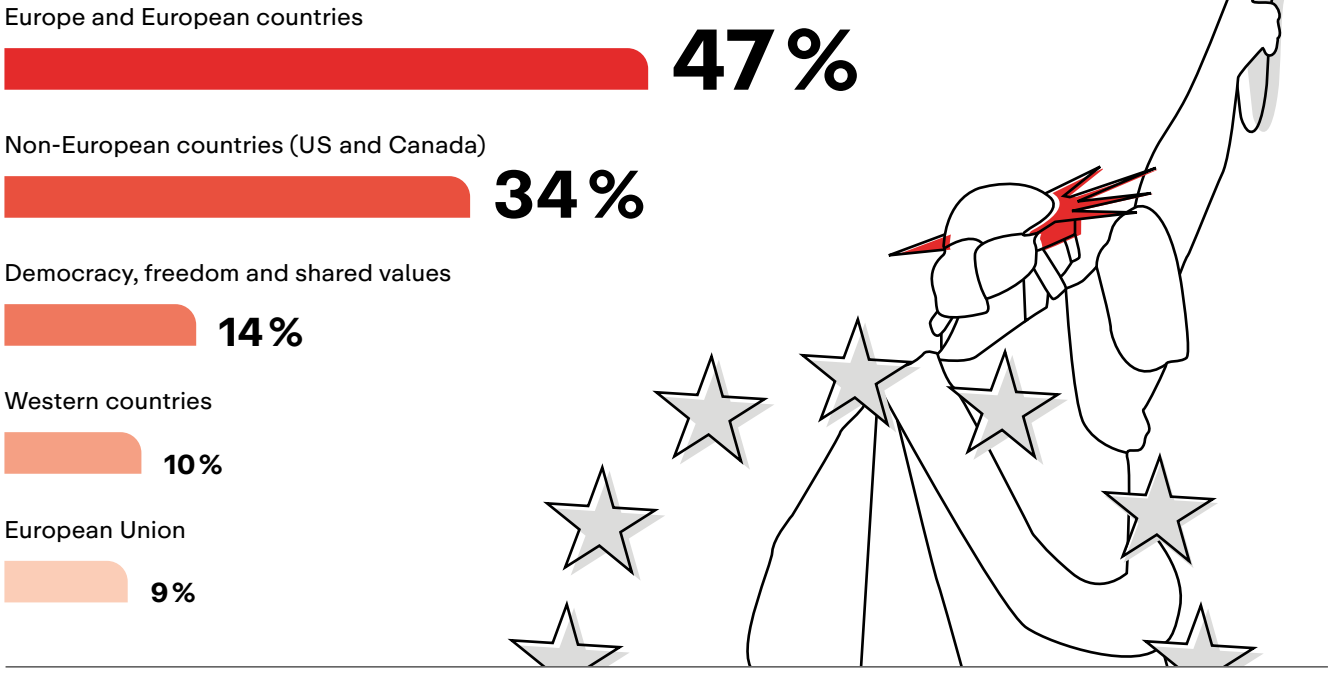
The West's unity in question

Does the West still exist as a political and cultural entity?



2026: don't know 2%, no answer 1%

What does the term the West mean to you personally?



2026: don't know 8%, no answer 1%

Artificial Intelligence

AI fuels conflict

How do you think AI will impact military conflicts between countries?

German respondents:

Increase conflicts **72 %**

No impact **20 %**

Decrease conflicts **3 %**

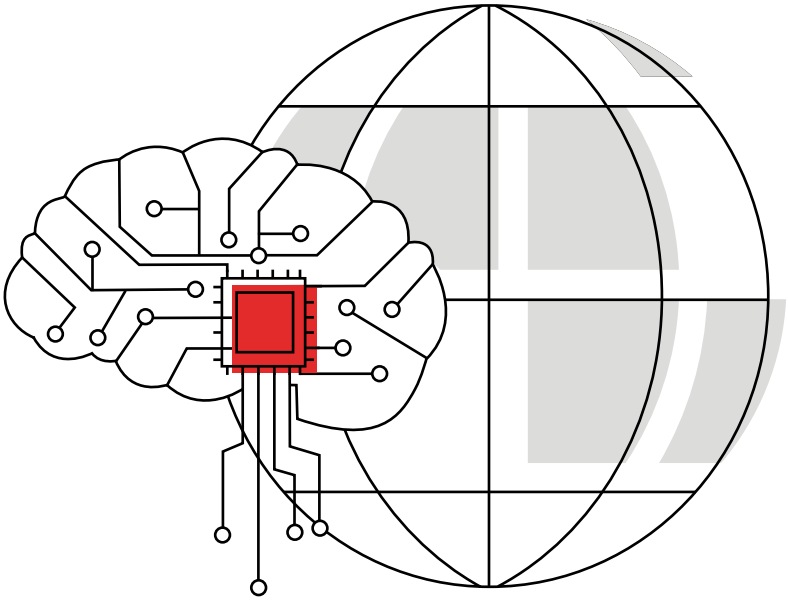
US respondents:

Increase conflicts **41 %**

No impact **15 %**

Decrease conflicts **4 %**

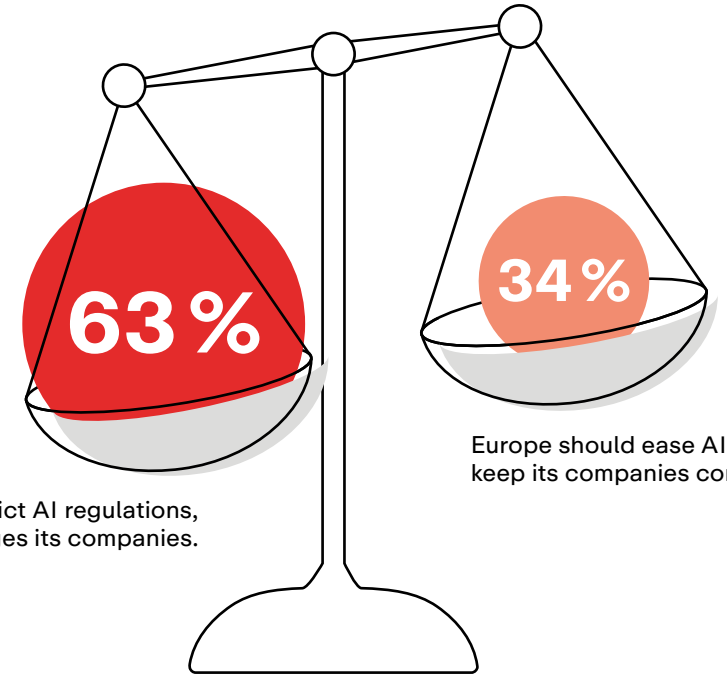
Not sure **38 %**



2026: ‘don’t know/no answer’ ranged from 2 to 3 per cent for all issues

Strict regulations for AI

Europe has stricter AI regulations than the United States and China.
Which statement do you agree with most?



Europe should maintain strict AI regulations, even if this disadvantages its companies.

Europe should ease AI regulations to keep its companies competitive.

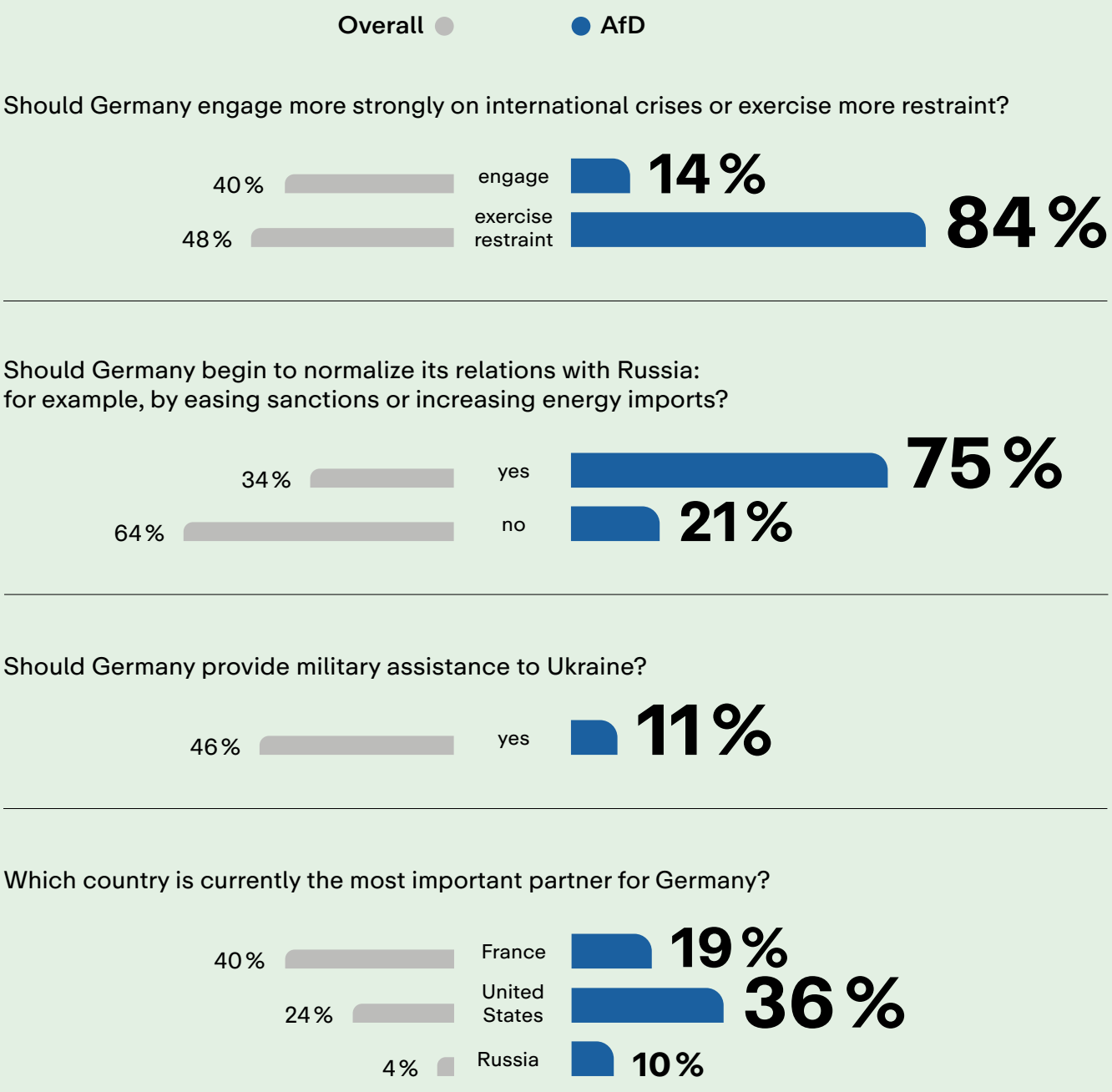
2026: don't know 2 %, no answer 1 %

The survey for Germany was commissioned by Körber-Stiftung and carried out by forsa Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analysen mbH, 15–28 September, 2026. Computer-Assisted Telephone interviews were conducted with a representative random sample of 1,501 participants (Margin of error: +/- 2.5 per cent for unit values). German data and results available at www.theberlinpulse.org.

The survey for the United States was conducted by Ipsos for Pew Research Center in September 2026. Online interviews were conducted with a representative random sample of 1,014 participants, 18–24 September, 2026 (Margin of error: +/- 3.1 per cent at the 95 per cent confidence level).

The World According to the AfD

How AfD supporters would steer Germany's foreign policy





‘Europe goes beyond geopolitical power’

As Europe fights to maintain its influence, it must not sacrifice what defines it: its free spirit, argues Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Twenty-five years ago, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty published Provincializing Europe*, a book that became a bestseller and a landmark text in postcolonial literature. It challenged the idea of Europe as the universal reference point for understanding history and modernity. Denise Ersoy met Chakrabarty over coffee in Hamburg, shortly before he took the stage for a conversation with Germany’s former chancellor Olaf Scholz.*

Körber-Stiftung: When you published *Provincializing Europe* 25 years ago, the world looked different than it does today. How do you see the world and Europe now?
Dipesh Chakrabarty: For roughly 500 years, Europe was the most powerful part of the world and played an extraordinary role in shaping it. It has had to let go of much of that power. At the same time, the international order created after the Second World War is breaking down. The UN Security Council no longer functions as it once did, the monetary order is changing, and major powers are again trying to create spheres of influence. I describe our situation as ‘no longer and not yet.’ The old order is no longer there but a new one has not yet emerged.

Countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa increasingly insist on defining their own place in the international order. What kind of order is emerging from this shift?
We don’t know yet. Russia is trying to create a sphere of influence, China is doing the same, and

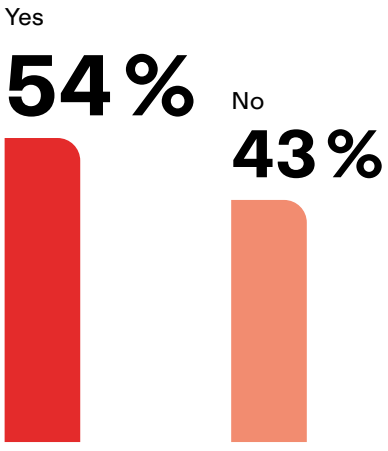
the United States is asserting its own interests. India is less powerful than China and is playing it somewhat both ways – cooperating with the United States and Israel on some questions, and with Russia and BRICS on others. Countries are jockeying to see what kind of order will emerge. Eventually there will be some kind of ordering again. But for now, we are in a period of profound instability.

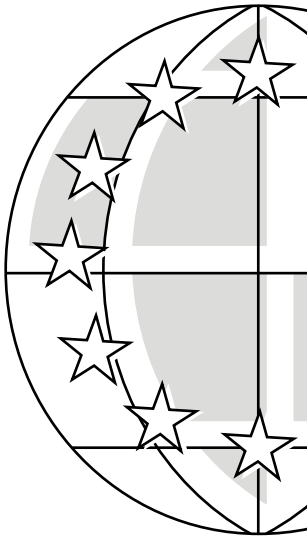
If Europe accepts that it is no longer the centre of the world, does that necessarily mean accepting less influence?
What I would worry about is Europe simply becoming another great power. Despite all its restrictions and contradictions, I think Europe still functions as the world's public sphere. You can come here and have rational discussions. There are museums, forums and a culture of public debate that I don't see to the same extent elsewhere. If Europe simply became another powerful actor and lost this public sphere, that would be a global loss. Europe still has a function in the world that goes beyond geopolitical power.

Europe presents itself as a defender of democracy, human rights and a rules-based international order. In a more multipolar world, what should it refuse to compromise on?
A practical politician has to deal with many contradictory demands at the same time. I have the privilege of being a professor who doesn't have to practise politics. But speaking idealistically, there are principles we should not compromise on. Human rights are one. Global health and climate justice increasingly belong to that discussion as well. And biodiversity is another. Politicians will make compromises, of course. But these are principles we should try to preserve.

China emphasizes sovereignty and non-interference rather than shared political values in its international partnerships. What does its rise tell us about power in a post-Western order?
China has achieved an extraordinary development and lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. That deserves recognition. But power is never benign. A powerful nation inevitably affects other nations, as it was the case with Europe. Europeans colonized and enslaved people. But Europe also developed philosophies that colonized people could use to criticize Europe itself, liberalism and Marxism among them. I often ask my Indian and Chinese friends: 'What forms of criticism will you allow your own intellectuals to develop, so that people affected by your power can use those ideas to criticize you?' There is no answer to that yet.

Can the European Union hold its own between the United States and China?





Can Europe assert itself as an independent actor between a rising China and an unpredictable United States?
I see a dilemma. Europe has fallen behind the United States and China in areas such as artificial intelligence, and China is ahead in technologies such as solar power and electric mobility. Europe is also not self-sufficient in resources. These are reasonable concerns, and they raise the question of whether Europe needs to function more effectively as a single market. But there are also deep differences within Europe. When I was recently in Warsaw, people told me: 'We are living in pre-war times.' The Polish government had sent households information about what to do in case Russia invaded. When I had been in Berlin, there was hardly a sense of that. These are neighbouring countries with very different priorities.

Can you understand the concerns in Europe?
Of course, I understand the concerns European leaders have. I just hope Europeans can preserve what is special about post-war Europe: it is pacifist, democratic, has social welfare and a great public sphere. These are inheritances for all of humanity. Until other societies have these things, Europe remains a place where we can debate with more freedom than in many other parts of the world. ↖

This interview was conducted on 22 September 2026 by Denise Ersoy.

Dipesh Chakrabarty
is distinguished service professor at the University of Chicago.



Beyond the False Binary: Why the UAE Is Betting on Europe

Gulf security is European security, argues Muath Alwari – and Germany is where a new kind of partnership is taking shape.

65% of Germans think military conflicts around the world will increase over the next five years.

Crisis clarifies the value of partnerships. This year, the United Arab Emirates faced an unprecedented challenge as thousands of unprovoked missile and drone attacks targeted its cities, public infrastructure and civilians. This was a war, and a shift in the political paradigm, that we did not ask for and had worked diligently to prevent. This crisis was a challenge to all our assumptions. While periods of relative stability can obscure what a partnership is truly made of, crisis does not. It reveals which partners will show up when support is genuinely needed and in what measure.

Refusing to be slotted into one camp or another

Diversification has long defined the United Arab Emirates' strategic outlook. It has carried the country far beyond oil and gas, making it a gold standard of development and a global contender across industries. The same logic permeates our approach to foreign relations. Here, diversification is a deliberate rejection of a false binary, a principled refusal to be slotted neatly into the camp of one major power or another, or between the West and alternative blocs. Our focus is on efficacy and on building productive partnerships across an increasingly fragmented international system.

The attacks on the United Arab Emirates pressure-tested, and proved, the success of this model. For our European partners, it became clear that Gulf security is intertwined with European energy security, supply chains and economic stability. For us, it strengthened the case for investing more heavily in our relationships with Europe, and expanding the partnerships that have proven most consequential.

Beyond the 'supplier-and-recipient' dynamic

Our partnership with Germany exemplifies what this kind of relationship can become. For decades, our economic ties followed a conventional pattern. German technology, industry and expertise flowed towards the Gulf – Emirati energy and capital moved into Germany. Today, this model has given way to something far more integrated. During the state visit of the President of the United Arab Emirates, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to Germany in September 2026, the United Arab Emirates announced a €40 billion investment package in the country, which includes advanced digital infrastructure, roughly 1 gigawatt of new data-centre capacity and wider ties across manufacturing, energy and emerging technologies.

Bilateral security cooperation has also grown in importance. The United Arab Emirates and Germany have established a strategic dialogue for international security and defence, and they have committed themselves to moving beyond the 'supplier-and-recipient' dynamic towards a broader and more substantive strategic defence partnership.

The UAE now offers Europe something different

This year's developments produced a transformative shift in expectations: the United Arab Emirates' relationships are becoming more robust, more multidimensional and more agile. In part, this is because we now offer Europe something different. The United Arab Emirates has become a key player in its own right through its logistics networks, its digital infrastructure and its connectivity to growing markets across the Middle East, Asia and Africa. As a result, its infrastructure, capital and capabilities are relevant to the industries and technologies likely to shape the future of economic power. For Germany, and for Europe more broadly, the United Arab Emirates can be a partner in building the economic, technological and security resilience that both regions increasingly require.

In the coming years, the strongest partnerships will be those that create mutual stakes in long-term security, resilience and prosperity. With our European partners, that means continuing to move beyond traditional frameworks and towards genuine, strategic co-investment in one another's future.↖



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When in Doubt, Side With Europe



Germany is rearming as never before, but the West it has been anchored in may no longer exist. Berlin must embed its power in Europe, argues Liana Fix.

In 2025, Germany announced the most significant defence-spending surge in its modern history. If it stays the course, it will spend around €162 billion – 3.5 per cent of its GDP – on defence by 2029, as much as France and the United Kingdom spend today combined. That would make it a great military power by the mid-2030s. This is not the first time modern Germany is rearming; it did so already at the beginning of the Cold War, when the Bundeswehr was founded in West Germany and integrated into the US-led NATO command. The strategic context of today's rearmament is different. The United States' commitment to Europe is in question, as is its role there as an ordering hegemon that not only keeps Russia out but also subdues any competition or rivalry among Europeans. Today, it is not Germany that is abandoning the liberal democratic Western world, through neutralism or a deal with the Soviet Union, as some feared during the Cold War. It is the West led by the United States that seems to be abandoning Germany.

What if the West in its traditional form no longer exists?

Germany's rearmament thus risks taking place in a strategic vacuum. The country has since the Second World War followed the principle of *Westbindung*: deep integration and orientation towards the West. But what if the West in its traditional form no longer exists? For the first time in its post-1945 history, Germany's leaders will have

to make strategic decisions on their own about the direction of its foreign policy.

The European pillar of the post-1945 strategic context is the only remaining one for German foreign policy. But even that pillar, which in reality was always a French one, is at risk with the prospect of the far right winning the 2027 presidential election in France.

Germany is thus in a triple dilemma: caught between the threats of Russian aggression, US abandonment, and of disintegration of the European project with the far right coming to power in Paris.

European defence only works if the AfD is kept in check

Europe has largely welcomed Germany's rearmament. Yet there is unease about the way it spends its defence budget, namely on its own defence companies, and about how deeply its new military power will be embedded in Europe. Especially, neighbours such as Poland ask how they can be assured that a rearmed Germany will remain a benign status quo power and lead Europe's defence without experiencing a resurgence of nationalism, particularly given the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD).

In contrast to the Rassemblement National in France or Fratelli d'Italia in Italy, which have gone to great pains to 'normalize', the AfD has radicalized. Given Germany's history, a far-right party in power, Berlin is considered a graver threat than the other versions of right-wing extremism in power in other European capitals. This matters beyond domestic politics: Germany can only successfully build European defence with less US involvement if the AfD is kept in check.

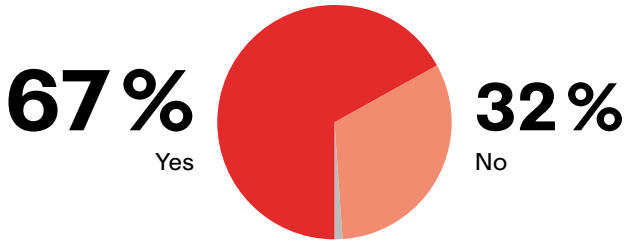
Embedding German power in European structures

The answer for Germany is to institutionalize and embed its new military power in European structures. This can take three forms: it could take on the main burden of financing Europe's defence via joint defence bonds, it could push for the Europeanization of national defence industries and it could pursue deeper military integration of its armed forces with European ones (and not only NATO ones). Deeper European military integration would constrain German power by subjecting Germany to collective decision-making.

The United States cares little about these questions anymore. For Germany, the combination of US change on the defence side and the divergence on values will be particularly difficult. Germans want Washington to be on the right side of history because it was the United States and the West that taught Germany what the right side of history was after 1945. Germany and Europe will have to push back against US meddling in favour of illiberal parties while upholding an interest-based relationship with Washington, even if it continues to pursue an isolationist approach towards Europe and regardless of whether there is a change of administration in 2029.

For the foreseeable future, Germany will have to give up its policy of 'having it both ways': It must change its traditional approach of 'when in doubt, side with America' to 'when in doubt, side with Europe'. Germany's story is also a warning to the West. History has not ended, nor has the world become a reflection of the West. No order, whether rules-based or liberal, can be sustainable without the military power to defend itself. ↖

Do you understand why some European countries are concerned about Germany's military growth?





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Whatever Benefits Germany



Close ties with Russia, China and the United States? No contradiction for the AfD – if Germany benefits, and the West comes second.
By Pauline von Pezold

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has shifted its foreign policy position. While it was long regarded as critical of the United States, some of its leading figures have grown increasingly close to the MAGA movement. Since Donald Trump's return to office, he and his policies have become a model for many within the AfD, with few seeing this as contradicting the party's close ties with Russia. The reason is its conception of foreign policy. It does not think in terms of lasting friendships but of partnerships – above all when they serve Germany's interests.

The AfD sees the world as multipolar, with the international order shaped by several competing centres of power: the United States, Russia, China and other states. In this view, Germany should not permanently align itself with any one camp but pursue its interests as independently as possible. The party calls for Germany to 'expand its sovereignty' and pursue its national interests. At the same time, the party advocates an 'interest-driven relationship' with China, Russia and the United States.

This fundamentally sets the AfD apart when it comes to the idea of the West as a political community. For it, being part of the West does not have value in itself. The United States is an important partner, but only a partner. China, India, Russia, Turkey and other countries can become partners as well. What matters is not belonging to a common political community but what benefits having a relationship with these countries offers Germany.

From the AfD's perspective, there is therefore no contradiction between supporting NATO membership, describing the United States as an important partner, calling for the

withdrawal of US troops from Germany and demanding closer relations with Russia. All of these positions answer the question of what benefits Germany.

Russia should be reintegrated into the international community

NATO is useful if it serves German security interests. The United States is important as long as it benefits Germany. Russia should be reintegrated into the international community because, the party hopes, this would bring economic advantages and cheaper energy. Whatever benefits Germany economically or strategically should take precedence. Values, alliance solidarity and a shared political identity are secondary.

That said, it would be wrong to portray the AfD as completely unified on foreign policy. It contains different actors with different priorities. Some have developed particularly close ties with Washington; others are closer to Moscow. There are also disagreements over specific issues. Yet beneath these lies a significant degree of consensus on one key point: Germany should act more independently and avoid being drawn into conflicts.

An AfD-led government would therefore not necessarily see Germany leaving the West with a bang. A more gradual shift in orientation would initially be more likely. The country might remain in NATO while insisting more strongly on national autonomy. Relations with Russia could be normalized and economic ties expanded. Berlin would also actively seek partners beyond the West.

The AfD does not want a weak West

This would raise the question of what the West even means under such a foreign policy. After all, the AfD does not want a weak West. It wants a strong Germany with strong partners, which could include the United States but also Russia, China, India or Turkey. European states are potential partners as well, though the party does not necessarily endorse the European Union as a political project.

The EU, however, is more than a tactical alliance in which each state calculates its immediate advantage in every decision. Over decades, its member states have built relationships, created common institutions and intertwined their interests. Germany benefits from this not only economically but also politically: these ties generate trust, influence and room for action.

The AfD might lead to a split within the EU, which would cause significant damage to Germany – whereas for Donald Trump's United States, Vladimir Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China a weaker EU is in their interest. The AfD's lack of partners at the European level is a cause and a symptom of this situation: its EU-sceptic stance would make cooperation with other European parties more difficult while the lack of partners further reinforces its opposition to the EU. European right-wing, pro-EU parties should therefore engage with the AfD, highlight the consequences of a weakened EU for Germany and its economy, and lobby for greater European cooperation.

64% of Germans don't want Germany to normalize its relations with Russia; for example, by easing sanctions or increasing energy imports.

For the AfD, foreign policy is not a project built on friendship

The AfD's vision of a world in which Germany navigates as freely as possible among competing centres of power also carries a risk: if every partner acts primarily in pursuit of its immediate interests, reliability becomes a scarce commodity. Germany might have more options but fewer partners willing to stand by it when doing so offers them no immediate benefit.

For the AfD, foreign policy is a transactional relationship between states, not a project built on friendship. In such a scenario, the West would no longer be Germany's home but merely one option among several. ↖



Pauline von Pezold is reporter for POLITICO and host of the Inside AfD podcast.



‘It is not in our interest to fuel a narrative that divides the world into two blocs.’

Europe first, but not Europe alone: Tristan Aureau on why Paris and Berlin should look beyond the West, and why the Franco-German engine is not enough.

Körber-Stiftung: Is strengthening the West still a viable goal, or should Paris and Berlin develop a new frame for the future?
Tristan Aureau: I think in Paris and Berlin our utmost priority should be strengthening Europe. This involves strengthening our capabilities in defence and industry across every sector, while also collaborating with our closest Western partners, such as the United States and other G7 countries. However, building Europe’s strategic autonomy also requires working closely with close partners outside the Western world: India, South Korea, African countries, Latin American countries. It is not in our strategic interest to fuel a narrative that divides the world into two blocs: ‘the West against the rest’. The best way to strengthen our partnerships, within the West and beyond, is to strengthen Europe.

How do you view the US administration’s framing of Western civilization, which some call identity-based or even racist?
It is not for Europe to advise the United States on its domestic politics, nor the other way round. We remain close partners on many issues, and we will keep strengthening that partnership. But I do not think that our interest in Europe is to frame our approach to all our partners in those terms. This year alone, the EU concluded free-trade agreements with India and with Mercosur, and built strategic partnerships across the globe, based on international law, predictability and common rules that benefit both sides.

83% of Germans want Germany to be neutral amid growing Chinese-US rivalry.

So, is cooperation with partners outside the West actually working on those principles?
India, for instance, would not consider itself part of the West. Is it a reason why we should not enter into such partnerships? Certainly not. We cooperate closely on trade, defence and technology because it is in our common interest, and India upholds the same principles of international law and predictable cooperation that we do.

Let's turn to domestic politics. In Germany's recent regional elections, political fringes made significant gains. Has the political centre left a vacuum on the desire for peace, particularly in Ukraine, that these parties are exploiting? And does the same apply to France?
I do not accept that premise. There is a willingness to negotiate. But what is left to negotiate when you're faced with an actor like Russia that is not willing to consider any form of compromise? Since June, Ukraine, backed by France, Germany and the United Kingdom, has been offering a ceasefire along the front line. Russia has made no concessions, instead escalating the conflict by striking energy and civilian targets and carrying out hybrid attacks across Europe.

Our poll *The Berlin Pulse* shows that support in Germany for delivering weapons to Ukraine is shrinking.
After more than four years of war, I am struck by how high support for Ukraine remains all over Europe. While most Europeans would prefer peace, they understand that continued support for Ukraine is the only way to stop this escalation.

Let's move to Franco-German cooperation. How would you rate relations between the two countries today?
Our strategic assessments have never been so aligned. We see eye to eye on the Russian threat and the need to prepare for a potential major shock around 2030. Regarding what I would term 'China shock 2.0', Chancellor Friedrich Merz and President Emmanuel Macron are pushing the same line at the European Council. We are also moving together on increasing our military capabilities within the Alliance: through the Zeitenwende, Germany's reform of its debt brake, France doubling its military budget since 2017, and our joint work on forward deterrence. Although there have been setbacks, such as with the Future Combat Air System project, these should not distract from a level of convergence between Paris and Berlin that has rarely been seen before.

Speaking about setbacks: What do France and Germany need to do differently, now that Washington is a less reliable partner?
The answer lies in our ability to achieve more as Europeans, in terms of defence, competitiveness and innovation. Strategic autonomy is simple: we should work with partners whenever we can and act on our own whenever we must.

Are France and Germany the drivers of that European strengthening effort?
In a union of 27, the Franco-German engine is necessary but not sufficient. Expecting the rest of Europe to just follow Paris and Berlin no longer fits the world we are in. It would for instance not make sense to strengthen European defence without Poland, which spends 5 per cent of its GDP on defence, and Italy, or the Baltic and Nordic states.

How has the war in Iran affected Franco-German cooperation, and has it made it harder to keep US attention on Ukraine?
The deployment of US military resources towards Iran has had a real impact on equipment deliveries to Ukraine – the two are connected. Germany and France did not participate in the strikes on Iran, and our focus is now on contributing to stability. France has supported our Gulf partners, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and worked closely with the United Kingdom and Germany to secure the resumption of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. We have been cooperating with Berlin and London on Iran's nuclear programme, its ballistic missiles and its proxies for years, long before February this year, and this work will continue. ↖

The interview was conducted on 15 October by Lilli Blank and Jonathan Lehrer.

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When the Anchor Breaks Loose

The US is dismantling its rule of law, and its allies are paying the price. Europe must call it out and protect itself. By Cathryn Clüver Ashbrook

The transformation of democracy in the United States took just under two years. Given the country's anchoring global role, this hastens the unmooring not only of its domestic structures of governance and political life but also of the credibility and functionality of the West. Even as the American people attempted to claw back core control of their own democracy in mustering resounding turnout and a 'blue wave', the country's institutions remain weakened, the restoration of the full rule of law the essential challenge of the moment.

At the heart of the rule of law lies the constraining of power by institutions, courts and parliaments – the translating and focusing components of the sovereign: a country's people. But, according to the unitary executive theory used by MAGA strategists, power should be absolute and centred in the presidency. This is a violation of the Founding Fathers' principles that constitutes an attempted 'second American revolution', in the words of Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts – one that takes power away from the people.

This revolution manifests itself in the overuse of executive power, the weakening of independent institutions such as the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Federal Communications Commission, the attempts to curtail the role of the Federal Reserve by the executive, the layoff of almost 300,000 members of the professional bureaucracy, the curtailing of press freedom, and the financial and physical threats to make members of Congress fall in line. Alongside executive orders, the administration has politicized the Department of Justice, which now litigates against political

opponents of the president, pursues arrangements to protect and enrich him and his family, and attempts to interfere with the democratic federal election process.

This administration has been a rupture but the erosion of democratic functions in the United States has a forty-year arc. The genius of MAGA strategists lies in their capacity to recognize how existing weaknesses can be manipulated to serve the objective of concentrating power in the hands of the president. Changes in ownership and content rules by Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton weakened the capacity of the media to hold power accountable. Party political transformation has created enmity in Congress – something the Founding Fathers feared – making bipartisan compromise nearly impossible.

From valued partner to active threat

The combination of this erosion, the curtailing of rule-of-law principles for the sake of the president's political and financial interests, and the incongruity in public policy emanating from cabinet infighting and imperial impulses in the Oval Office broadcast the United States' decline to the world. Coupled with erratic foreign policy from Iran to NATO, the withdrawal from multilateral bodies that implement the international rule of law, the imposition of tariffs, the rapid growth of the national debt and the bond market experiments, this means the United States has gone from being a valued partner to being an active threat to its allies.

The cases of Hungary, Turkey, Russia and other countries prove that abandoning the rule of law and metastasizing corruption have a clear impact on GDP growth, inflation, innovation and investment. A functioning democracy can deliver broad and shared economic growth and security as well as political consensus and legal protection for all. Enfeebled by deliberate actions, the United States cannot deliver this at present. And, because of its market size and shaken international standing, the cascading effects threaten the capacity of the 'rest of the West' to thrive.

The EU must double down on its founding premise

The European Union is built on the rule of law as the primary motor for integration. It reaffirms its commitment to equity and rule of law through its actions in multilateral institutions, including by increasing its financial commitments to these. Small wonder, then, that the current US administration is financially and structurally trying to undermine it. The EU, the United Kingdom and other Western countries cannot allow that to happen. Instead, the EU must double down on the defence of its founding premise. To replace the United States as the anchor of a 'wider West', including the Indo-Pacific democracies, Japan and South Korea, it must find the courage to diagnose and call out the well-financed, systematic destruction of democracy in the United States and offer support to those actors – in the federal states, in civil society, the media and companies; and individuals – that are resisting. This can take smarter and subtler forms than lobbing criticism at Washington – the shrewd use of investments, resources and people can make a difference.

24% of Germans see the United States as the most important partner country.

Building back is hard – insulate institutions now

The experiences of Hungary and Poland prove that building back after a significant loss of core features of the rule of law is more difficult than political destruction. Hence, a primary task must be insulating domestic and multilateral institutions through legal protections and structural backup (such as the deepening of the Canadian-European axis within NATO). For EU member states, this must include the protection of their legal systems as well as guardrails on media ownership, funding for public media and support for local media. Raising barriers against foreign political funding is as important as developing broader trade relationships. The EU, the United Kingdom and other like-minded countries have the opportunity through a new coalition of democracies to make fidelity to rule-of-law and democratic principles a unifying selling proposition to the rest of the world. Losing sight of this fundamental challenge will spell the end of the West as we know it. ↖



Cathryn Clüver Ashbrook is executive vice president at the Bertelsmann Stiftung.



Falko Droßmann represents Hamburg-Mitte in the Bundestag – a constituency of contrasts, from the wealthy port to deprived Billstedt. Can this work?

Körber-Stiftung: What are the biggest foreign policy challenges for Germany, seen from your constituency in Hamburg rather than from Berlin?
Falko Droßmann: First the economy. In my constituency, I have more than 40,000 enterprises; we have the harbour and the city centre. One example is the growing competition from China in the automotive industry, with similar pressure in chemicals and steel. Chinese manufacturers can offer increasingly competitive products at substantially lower prices. That will reshape our prosperity. The second challenge for my constituents is the military threat. If I would have asked for €100 billion for the Bundeswehr when I first ran for the Bundestag, people would have called me crazy. We’re far past that figure now, and it’s necessary.

Are these the concerns your constituents actually raise?
Not the military threat. That still feels theoretical to many people here in Hamburg, where the threat seems less immediate. I often must advocate our ability to defend ourselves militarily again. But I have a large Polish community in my constituency that sees Russia completely differently, and migrant communities that experience events abroad in real time through their family. When there’s a coup in an African country, I know exactly which mosque in my community is affected. I see pro-Israel protests on one street and pro-Gaza protests on the next. This constituency demands foreign-policy engagement from me.

How do you respond when your constituents oppose the Berlin coalition government's foreign policy, which you support?
Proactively. There are many mosque communities in my constituency. After the Hamas terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023, I had sharp disagreements with some of their members about the war. I went into those communities and had the argument directly. I told them: 'You didn't elect me just to repeat your opinion in Berlin; you elected me to listen to you and explain how I reach my own conclusions. We may disagree. But I owe you that explanation.'

What do you say to people who would rather see the money for defence spent on schools or culture than on arms?
Honestly, there's a lot I don't want either. The difference is: You can come to me, your elected representative, and say 'I don't want this'. You can't do that in Russia or Iran. There are many countries where you can't do that anymore, and that's exactly what we're defending here. Rearmament also supports the economy: a Leopard 2 tank involves a broad network of German manufacturers and suppliers. Resilience matters: our drinking water supply depends on electricity. Major power outages can therefore also threaten the water supply. People need to be able to rely on the state to keep the lights and water on, and armed drones off their heads. That's what the state is for.

There's a narrative that Germany 'cut the Bundeswehr's budget into ruin.' Is that fair?
I think that's too simplistic. The Bundeswehr was capable; it just had a different mission, but there were also serious gaps in equipment and readiness. For too long, Russia was seen primarily as a market rather than a threat. Economic ties, however, do not guarantee security. Now we have to catch up. The war in Ukraine has two facets: brutal trench warfare involving heavy artillery and a drone and cyber war in which drones can become obsolete within a month. We need venture capital in defence too. It's a huge financial burden but it's unavoidable. If we don't manage it, we can forget our free economic system.

Let us talk about the new military service model in Germany. Critics say young people, who are most affected, weren't consulted enough.
I helped negotiate the model. I was drafted against my will under the old system. I ended up staying for over 20 years in military service instead of nine months. The new model initially relies on voluntary service and gives young people a choice I never had. For some students from migrant families, defending freedom was simply obvious. In more settled, rural parts of my constituency, the attitude was closer to 'Why should I bother?'

The defence build-up worries some neighbouring countries, given Germany's history. How should we handle that?
Oh, I think it's the opposite. I meet Polish and Swedish officers constantly, and they tell me: 'You're Europe's economic engine, you're in the middle of the continent, many key military logistics routes run through you, please take the lead'. When we keep saying 'You know our history, we can't', they point to today's threat and ask us to take responsibility. And I think they have a point. No defence of Europe is logistically possible without Germany. We can't avoid taking this responsibility much longer. ↖

The interview was conducted on 5 September 2026 by Florian Bigge.

Falko Droßmann
is a member of the German Bundestag for Hamburg-Mitte and the defence policy spokesperson for the Social Democratic Party's parliamentary group.



Bringing Foreign Policy Home

On 5 September 2026, Falko Droßmann took part in our *Wahlkreistag* event in his constituency. In collaboration with Hallo Bundestag, we invited over 20 people from Hamburg-Mitte, selected at random, to discuss foreign policy, their expectations of Germany, their concerns and the role they believe Germany should play in the world.



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