

Germany's New Defense Minister: An Opportunity for Strengthening the U.S.–German Security Partnership

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. and Germany remain close allies, and the U.S. should continue to encourage Berlin to spend more on defense and do more to tackle shared threats.

Germany remains an economic powerhouse that punches below its weight in terms of defense. It must continue to take on a larger role bolstering collective defense.

A new defense minister offers the unique opportunity for Germany to begin rebuilding its military capability and deepen U.S.-German security cooperation.

On July 24, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and potential successor to Chancellor Angela Merkel, became Minister of Defense. Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer will face significant challenges in this new role, including in rebuilding atrophied German military capabilities and in overcoming historic public skittishness toward an engaged and robust German military. However, the appointment of the politically influential Kramp-Karrenbauer to the Defense Ministry is unusual and presents an opportunity for a deepening of U.S.–German security cooperation.

Germany has long been a crucial security partner of the United States. As the largest economy in Europe and the second-most populous North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member after the U.S., Germany's decisions affect transatlantic security. Germany

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should continue to take on a larger role in bolstering collective defense. The U.S. should encourage Germany to play a role commensurate with its political and economic clout. This should include taking on a lead role in Baltic security, recognizing and mitigating risks of Chinese companies in Germany's telecommunications sector, and creating a credible plan to increase defense spending.

Germany: A Crucial NATO Ally

Besides the United Kingdom, Germany remains the United States' most important ally in Western Europe. Germany hosts more than 35,000 American troops and their families, far more than any other European nation; pays more than \$1 billion a year to offset the cost of basing U.S. troops on its soil; and is the keystone logistics hub for the U.S. presence in Europe. The U.S. and Germany enjoy important intelligence military cooperation and intelligence ties, and retain a shared interest in a stable, secure Europe.

Both Germany and the U.S. remain firmly committed to NATO as the cornerstone of transatlantic security. In her first speech as Defense Minister to the Bundestag on July 24, Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer stated:

Germany is and remains firmly anchored in the transatlantic alliance, is and remains firmly anchored in NATO. NATO is the guarantor of our security. As a political and military alliance, NATO stands for the values and interests of all its members. We are linked by our historical and cultural experience as well as our political convictions. It is this special bond which distinguishes us from authoritarian forces that are challenging us and the international order.¹

However, as memories of the Cold War fade, and following significant drawdowns of American forces in Europe in the decades after, no one should take the transatlantic bond for granted. This is especially true within Europe. A September 2018 poll found that Germans believe their country should cooperate more with China (67 percent) and Russia (69 percent) than with the U.S. (41 percent).² (The same poll found that 70 percent of Americans believe the U.S. should cooperate more with Germany.) It is incumbent upon Germany's new defense minister not only to make the case for additional military spending and engagement, but also to remind the German public of the importance of the transatlantic bond for German security and economic prosperity.

Recently, Germany has been taking on a greater role in NATO collective defense, serving as one of four framework nations for NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence battalions, with 540 troops stationed in Lithuania.³

Additionally, the Luftwaffe, the German air force, has taken part 11 times in Baltic Air Policing, more than any other nation's armed forces, including most recently in the second half of 2018. Additionally, in January 2019, Germany took over the lead for NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Taskforce (VJTF),⁴ the spearhead forces of the NATO Response Force.

Shortcomings of Germany's Defense Capabilities

Despite some positive trends, Germany remains an economic powerhouse that punches well below its weight in terms of defense. In 2018, it spent only 1.23 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense and 14.1 percent of its defense budget on equipment below the NATO benchmark of 20 percent.⁵ This year, Germany officially reneged on its pledge to spend 2 percent of GDP by 2024, informing NATO that it would reach only 1.5 percent five years from now.⁶ Germany plans to raise defense spending to 1.3 percent of GDP in 2019, and to 1.37 percent in 2020; however, under current budget plans, its defense spending will decline again to 1.25 percent in 2023.⁷ Because of the political constraints under the current coalition government, which is likely to remain in office until 2021, German defense spending is not likely to increase significantly.

The German military remains underfunded and underequipped. One former German diplomat has stated that without NATO, Germany would have to double its defense budget to 3 percent or 3.5 percent of GDP or risk being "completely blind, deaf and defenceless."⁸ Examples of Germany's lack of equipment and military readiness are legion and worrisome. In addition, the nation suffers from acute manpower shortages, including 21,000 vacant officer posts.⁹

A major upcoming procurement decision for Germany is a replacement for its 90 Tornado aircraft, set to be retired in 2030. The Tornado replacement, planned to "enter service in about 2025,"¹⁰ will need to be able to carry both nuclear and conventional weapons, as the Tornados are dual-capable aircraft equipped to carry B61 tactical nukes in addition to conventional payloads.¹¹ In January 2019, the F-35 was eliminated as a potential replacement, leaving the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and the Eurofighter Typhoon.¹²

A Pathway for Deepening U.S.-German Military Cooperation

The U.S. and Germany enjoy strong intelligence, military, and political cooperation. With Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer now heading the Defense

Ministry, U.S. policymakers should look for ways to deepen existing security cooperation, and encourage the defense minister to address areas of concern.

U.S. policymakers should:

- **Encourage Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer to make the case for the transatlantic alliance.** Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer has a special responsibility to explain to the German public why the U.S.–German partnership is important. Germany’s political and military leadership must consistently remind the public why the transatlantic partnership remains essential for the nation’s security and economic prosperity.
- **Encourage Germany to meet its defense spending commitments.** While the U.S. should acknowledge the recent increase in defense spending by Germany, it must also be clear that German political leaders should live up to their government’s defense spending commitments. In her remarks to the German parliament, Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer presented the need for defense spending as a prerogative for peace and prosperity. This argument must be made to the German public in order to overcome cultural and historic antipathy and hostility toward defense spending and military service.
- **Seek a greater German Presence in the Baltic Sea.** German naval assets, when operational, are made for operating in the Baltic Sea. As a Baltic nation, Germany should serve as a leadership role in organizing like-minded allies to ensure a consistent, robust presence in the Baltic Sea.
- **Agree at the NATO Summit of Allied Leaders in London this December to establish a Baltic Air Defense mission.** The Baltic Air Policing Mission, to which Germany has contributed heavily, has been useful for policing the region’s airspace, yet more needs to be done. A robust Baltic Air Defense mission is needed to ensure that NATO can defend the region on the ground, in the air, and at sea.
- **Work with the non-NATO Nordic countries to improve the air defense of the Baltic.** Due to their geographical location, non-NATO Finland and Sweden would form an important part of any Baltic Air Defense strategy. Washington and Berlin should work closely with Helsinki and Stockholm to ensure regional coordination and cooperation.

- **Ask Germany to consider sending additional troops and enablers to Lithuania.** As a framework nation, Germany has deployed an armored infantry company consisting of 540 troops to Lithuania. Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer should signal Germany's continued commitment to collective defense by announcing an increase in German troops taking part (the U.S. and U.K., also framework nations, have more than 800 troops deployed to Poland and Estonia, respectively), and should include enablers such as air defense units.
- **Convey the importance of German dual-capable aircraft for NATO deterrence.** NATO is first and foremost a nuclear alliance. German dual-capable aircraft are crucial components for ensuring that NATO's nuclear forces continue providing adequate deterrence. The U.S. should encourage Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer to reaffirm Germany's commitment to procuring dual-capable aircraft to replace its Tornados, including reconsideration of the F-35 platform.
- **Push Germany to contribute to a regular, rotational presence in the Black Sea.** NATO's interest in Black Sea security is increasing, but the overall presence of non-Black Sea NATO warships is decreasing. So far, in 2019, German naval forces have only spent 18 days in the Black Sea. NATO should establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission modeled on the successful Baltic Air Policing mission in order to maintain a robust NATO presence in the Black Sea in line with the 1936 Montreux Convention. Germany should commit to contribute in advance to this presence.
- **Focus on concerns over the Nord Stream II Pipeline.** While not strictly a competency of the U.S. Department of Defense or the German Ministry of Defense, Nord Stream II is a pipeline project that is neither economically necessary, nor geopolitically prudent. U.S. officials should not pass up an opportunity to reiterate that a pipeline that strengthens Russia's stranglehold on European energy undermines collective security and further reinforces divisions across Europe.
- **Continue to raise U.S. concerns about the role of Chinese IT giant Huawei in the German telecommunications sector.** While not strictly a competency of the U.S. Department of Defense or the German Ministry of Defense, both have an interest in ensuring that secure communications and intelligence sharing are not jeopardized.

China is an adversarial power that should not be allowed to use its government-controlled companies to gain a significant foothold in the burgeoning fifth-generation (5G) wireless networks of the U.S. or allied countries. Such a presence would be a clear national security threat that could decisively compromise telecommunications and data infrastructure—including the communications integrity of the military and intelligence community.

Conclusion

Despite policy disagreements, the U.S. and Germany remain close allies. Continually making the case why Germany should spend more on defense and do more to tackle the threats coming from China, Iran, and Russia is an important prerogative. At the same time, American policymakers should approach the bilateral relationship with respect, and focus on policy areas where there is synergy with Germany, such as security for the Baltic region.

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Endnotes

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