

What Germany's grand coalition means for European defence and security



Following months of coalition negotiations, a new German government has finally taken office. But what does the new government mean for the EU? [Alessandra Pozzi Rocco](#) writes that with her next term in power now secured, Merkel has the chance to craft EU history further, notably by forging ahead on common defence and security.



Credit: [European Council President](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Berlin has a freshly installed government – at last. Six months of coalition negotiations reminded the 28-country bloc of how central and necessary a steady German leadership is for EU policymaking. After getting through several crises, the EU is now seeing stable economic growth and a calmer political climate. But the window of opportunity to push further economic and political integration is right before our eyes, and it is up to our leadership to seize this new momentum. Now.

Starting off on the right foot, there is great potential for advancement in the field of security and defence policy. Fifty years of slow and clumsy developments in this area can now take a new turn, and Germany has a pivotal role to play in facilitating this process. There is a good reason to believe Berlin will take more decisive steps out of necessity, but with an even-handed approach with regards to defence, development and cooperation.

The stars are aligning. The unique combination of factors shows the time is ripe for concrete policy action. First, the EU's security is threatened by a wide array of risks: its closest neighbour turns out to be a revisionist Russia annexing Crimea and leading a proxy war in Eastern Ukraine based on hybrid conflict practices. The divisive Western public opinion over fake news and the use of energy supplies as a tool for influencing Ukraine at freezing winter temperatures make eastern EU members highly concerned, and the neighbourhood broadly more unstable.

Looking South, although ISIS has almost ceased to exist, terrorism still proliferates in lawless parts of the MENA region. It is less stable than ever and poses direct threats to EU security through migration flows and terrorism. In 2016, more than 65 million people were displaced, fleeing conflict around the world. Angela Merkel reacted by taking in one million refugees, but also by allowing military steps that would have been unthinkable before 2014: her government has sent, for the first time since WWII, lethal support into an active conflict zone. And this has been little remarked upon in the media, if at all. It could be considered as either deeply contradictory to Germany's pacifist culture or as a mindset evolution amongst the establishment based on the premise that the German public needs to be protected regardless of the cost.

Second, Europeans always looked West for support, friendship and partnership in addressing challenges of the future. Today, Brussels hardly understands Washington, which is making relations as difficult as they are unpredictable. Recent evolutions in EU foreign policy – notably the awakening of PESCO sleeping beauty (Permanent Structured Cooperation, included in 2009 Lisbon Treaty) and the European Defence Fund – are a direct consequence of three interrelated factors.

The first is the unreliability of American rhetoric over the past year on NATO – obsolete no longer, solidarity if 2% of GDP is allocated to military spending, or unconditional solidarity to its oldest and closest allies? Second, the strong concern of eastern capitals, which used to look at NATO for protection and reject further EU defence policy based on arguments of unnecessary duplication is no more. And third, the eternal veto to any European development in defence posed by London has now disappeared with Brexit.

Not only have barriers been lifted, but a fresh wind of change is blowing throughout the continent – a new energy brought by a younger generation in power. There come Emmanuel Macron, Charles Michel, Marc Rutte and Xavier Bettel, with a view to making EU defence and security policy a voice multiplier for Europeans on the international stage.

Angela Merkel once again took it a step forward by stating the EU needed to take its future into its own hands. Late February 2018, Germany's Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen shared her view at the London School of Economics for more EU in NATO through an army of Europeans in 2025, one that would be entirely integrated, interoperable and jointly commanded and could act fast.

To think that she is leading the most ambitious reform of the Bundeswehr to date with these objectives in mind brings good hope that her plan will materialise and make Berlin's military capabilities reliable for allies in out-of-area missions. Bearing in mind that foreign policy is devised harmoniously between political leadership and expert networks in Berlin circles, all this translates into a greater German readiness to act on EU foreign policy altogether.

Overall, most recent opinion polls (Pew Research Centre) find the German public to be more concerned by security than in the past, and more receptive to EU action in the field. However, surprising numbers show there is a stark need for better communication by the leadership: less than 30% would support a NATO intervention in helping an ally under attack. Germany's approach will be a tailored one, reflecting both its culture and continued pressure from allies for more responsibility in the field. Berlin is working to lead from the middle, foster cooperation, boost EU capacities, facilitate consensus and act as framework nation for military operations.

It also walks a fine line on the perception by eastern partners, who fear a dominant Germany would bring back dark memories. In all, it pursues the objective of making 27 voices fall into one that is heard and listened to on the international stage whilst not creating any competition to NATO. At last, it is now also a matter of legacy for Angela Merkel. Onto her fourth term, she is in a weaker political position but definitely still enjoys the trust and goodwill from key partners. As she now does not need to put electoral concerns at the top of her list, it is a great time for her to build European history further.

Detractors would, rightfully, ask how much of this is realistic if Germany still does not increase its military spending to meet the 2% GDP NATO target. But sometimes spending more to get faster results isn't the key to success. Having structural blocks lifted and providing wider leeway to policymaking is a much more powerful change and one that does not happen that often.

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About the author



Alessandra Pozzi Rocco

Alessandra Pozzi Rocco is a recent graduate from the London School of Economics and Sciences Po in Paris. She currently works in public policy.