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BULLETIN

Germany Prepares Both for Cooperation and Challenges Ahead of U.S. Elections

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The United States remains Germany's key partner in the economy and security. German public opinion and the majority of political parties recognise that a victory for Kamala Harris will be in the interest of Germany. At the same time, politicians in the governing coalition are seeking connections with Republicans to prepare for the possible return of Donald Trump. Facing a return to a Republican administration, Germany will emphasise the visible increase in defence spending after 2022 and the role of German investments in the U.S. In the event of a Harris victory, they will emphasise the benefits of maintaining the status quo in mutual relations.

U.S.—A Key Political and Economic Partner. Cooperation with the United States is one of the cornerstones of Germany's foreign policy. The importance of good transatlantic relations is emphasised by the leaders of both the ruling coalition as well as the opposition CDU/CSU. The Social Democrats' most left-wing and the populist parties the [Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance \(BSW\)](#) and [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\)](#), which repeat anti-NATO and pro-Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine, remain reluctant towards the U.S.

The 2021 coalition agreement between the SPD-Greens and the FDP explicitly pointed out the need to "renew and dynamise" Germany's relationship with the U.S. after Trump's term in office, during which he sharply criticised Germany and undermined transatlantic ties. Maintaining the best possible relationship with the U.S. remains Germany's strategic goal. Close political and military cooperation strengthens Germany's position on the international stage and its status as a key EU state. Its trade with the U.S. is essential to Germany's economy and export-oriented industry (especially automotive and machinery). According to data from the Federal Statistical Office for 2023, the United States was Germany's second-largest trading partner after China, with the value of mutual trade amounting to €252.6 billion. In the first half of 2024, the U.S.

ranked first, ahead of China. Germany benefits from a positive trade balance with the U.S., with a surplus of €63 billion last year.

Close economic ties are evidenced by the scale of mutual investment. Germany is the fifth-largest investor in the U.S. In 2023, German investments amounted to more than \$472 billion. Examples of major German investors include the automotive companies BMW, which is expanding plants in South Carolina, and Audi, which is also planning to build a plant in the state. In total, German companies provide more than 900,000 jobs in the U.S. American companies invested more than \$193 billion in Germany last year. Among the most important American investments in Germany is Intel's planned semiconductor plant in Magdeburg.

The U.S. as a Security Provider. German-U.S. cooperation in NATO is considered crucial to Germany's security, according to the country's 2022 National Security Strategy. On the bilateral level, the presence of American troops numbering about 36,000 is vital. Germany hosts the most U.S. troops of all European countries. Germany's strategic importance to the U.S. is also reflected in location of the commands of U.S. forces in Europe and Africa in Stuttgart. Germany is also one of six NATO countries that participate in the [nuclear-sharing programme](#), for which it procured F-35 aircraft in 2022.

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The role of U.S. leadership in German security was confirmed after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Chancellor Olaf Scholz, aiming to reduce possible risks associated with supplying weapons to Ukraine while considering his public's concerns, made Germany's steps in this regard conditioned on U.S. decisions. An example was the agreement to supply Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, expressed in 2023 only after the [U.S. announced the transfer of Abrams tanks](#). An exception was Scholz's objection to the transfer of Taurus missiles to Ukraine because of fears among his electorate.

The majority of Germany's governing coalition, as well as the opposition CDU/CSU, support the [deployment of U.S. medium-range missiles on German territory](#), announced by the U.S. and German governments at the NATO summit in Washington. The broad consensus on the issue stems from a growing awareness of the threats from Russia and the need to provide an effective deterrent against it. However, some SPD activists and BSW and AfD politicians consider the decision too risky and taken without political consultation.

Politicians and Public Opinion Towards the U.S. Elections. The objective of Chancellor Scholz's government is to maintain the status quo in bilateral relations regardless of the outcome of the election. Given Trump's isolationist tendencies, it would be far more challenging for the federal government to work with his administration than with Kamala Harris'.

Although Germany allocated [€100 billion in the form of a special fund](#) to modernise its military after 2022 and [become independent of Russian raw materials](#), in line with demands from Trump's presidency, German political and economic elites are wary of possible actions by a second Trump administration that could include new tariffs on imported products, dropping support for Ukraine, and reducing the U.S. military presence in Europe to bolster forces in the Indo-Pacific. The doubts are bolstered by speculation that Richard Grenel, the former ambassador to Berlin from 2018–2020 and a critic of German foreign policy, is the leading candidate for the U.S. secretary of state should Trump win.

To prepare for this possibility, representatives of both the ruling coalition and the Christian Democrats are seeking alignment with Republicans and preparing new communication tactics to counter Trump's rhetoric. As part of these efforts, a delegation of politicians from various parties met with [Republicans during their July national convention](#). SPD head Lars Klingbeil is attending the Democratic National Convention. The German communication is based on highlighting the changes made in the country's defence and security policy, particularly the achievement of the 2% of GDP in spending expected by the U.S. and NATO (adding up spending from the state budget and the aforementioned special fund).

Another element of the messaging will be to cite the benefits to the U.S. of cooperation with Germany, such as new jobs created by companies investing in the U.S. and orders of U.S. military equipment for the Bundeswehr (F-35 aircraft, Stinger anti-aircraft systems). This is to match Trump's transactional view of politics and alliances.

According to an April opinion poll for Atlantik-Brücke, 54% of Germans surveyed considered the partnership with the U.S. to be strong, but fears of it weakening in the event of a Trump victory play a large role. According to a survey for the weekly Stern and RTL TV, 79% of those surveyed said they supported Harris. This result is linked to the perception of the Democratic candidate as the politician who can ensure the continuation of the existing cooperation with Germany, both within NATO and bilaterally. Among voters of the respective parties, only AfD supporters expressed majority support (51%) for Trump, based on his declared adherence to conservative values, dislike of Ukraine and the EU, and sympathy for Russia.

In the public debate surrounding the U.S. elections, most German politicians and commentators overlook the option that, regardless of the outcome, the intensifying Sino-U.S. rivalry may force Germany to face the challenge of taking more responsibility for European security than it has so far.

Conclusions and Forecasts. From the point of view of Germany, as well as transatlantic relations, a safer scenario would be a Harris victory, as it would ensure the continuation of the existing course. However, steps towards rapprochement with the Republicans and the preparation of appropriate communication towards Trump may not be enough. In the case of the argument about the 2% of GDP spent on defence, Republicans may claim that some Alliance countries (such as Poland) spend as much as 4% of GDP on defence. Moreover, there are no references to relations with China in the message prepared for Trump. An area of potential dispute between Germany and the U.S. is the close German-Chinese economic relations. A Republican administration may press Germany to adopt a more assertive posture towards China (by limiting trade and mutual investment), which will be difficult for Germany given the scale of its ties with the Asian country. The German trade surplus with the U.S. will also be a subject of criticism.

Germany is not prepared to withdraw or drastically reduce U.S. military involvement in Europe, as Trump advocates. Germany's stagnant economy and the prospect of next year's Bundestag elections will make it difficult to take further steps to strengthen the Bundeswehr. Despite these unfavourable circumstances, Poland, along with other allies, should generate diplomatic pressure and mobilise Germany to systematically increase defence spending beyond the 2% of GDP level and consistently support Ukraine to the greatest extent possible.