

Lohse, Tim; Bolouri, Armin

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Policy Debate of the Hour

Securing Peace in Europe: A Role for the Weimar Triangle?

Key Messages

- The Weimar Triangle countries – France, Germany, and Poland – could enhance Europe's defense and strategic autonomy thanks to their complementarities
- Germany, enjoying fiscal space, opted for debt-financed rearmament but stagnant voluntary recruitment and sluggish procurement form bottlenecks
- France, lacking fiscal space, faces the guns versus butter dilemma while retaining a strong defense industry and nuclear autonomy
- Poland benefits from its allies' deterrence and industrial strength while contributing a forward posture through its East Shield and large, publicly supported armed forces
- To increase and sustain defense spending, tax increases or budget consolidation might be necessary, which are politically more viable for both Germany and Poland



Tim Lohse is Professor of Applied Microeconomics at the Berlin School of Economics and Law and Deputy Director of the Berlin Centre for Empirical Economics. He is also a fellow of the CESifo Research Network.



Armin A. Bolouri is a research fellow at the Berlin School of Economics and Law, PhD Candidate in applied economics at the Free University Berlin, and affiliated with the Berlin Centre for Empirical Economics.

Europe's security landscape, reshaped by Russia's aggression, has sparked intense discussions on strengthening defense capabilities and achieving strategic autonomy (Dorn, Potrafke, and Schlepper 2024). Shifts in US politics have further questioned the reliability of American military support for NATO. This skepticism is not new: over 60 years ago, during a meeting with President Kennedy, President de Gaulle doubted the US commitment to Europe's defense, prompting France to pursue strategic autonomy by developing its own nuclear capabilities. Now, it is clear that Europe must also pursue strategic autonomy, but the question remains: how?

The EU's Common Security and Defense Policy provides the framework for coordinating and implementing collective defense and security measures. Recent initiatives – including the EU Preparedness Strategy, the Defence

Equity Facility, and the White Paper on European Defence – aim to bolster readiness. The ReArm Europe Plan (also Readiness2030), announced in March 2025, seeks to allocate EUR 800 billion for defense enhancements. This funding comprises EUR 150 billion from EU-backed loans and EUR 650 billion from national budgets, supported by relaxed fiscal rules.¹

Possible New Role for the Weimar Triangle

While all these EU initiatives aim to enhance collective defense readiness and strategic autonomy, their success relies on political alignment among key member states. Due to potentially diverging interests and perspectives on Russia, the EU struggles to progress politically at an appropriate speed. A more strategically aligned political format could become a nucleus and catalyst for increased European cooperation. The Weimar Triangle, established in 1991 in the city of Weimar, connects France, Germany, and Poland to strengthen regional cooperation and shape EU policy from a shared perspective. Though not an official EU body, it forms Europe's West-Central-East axis, expanding the Franco-German partnership post-Cold War to include a key Eastern European ally. Recently, ties between Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw have strengthened, especially regarding security and defense. In a joint statement issued on May 22, 2024, their foreign ministers emphasized a commitment to a "strong, geopolitical EU" (France Diplomacy 2024). Germany's new Chancellor Merz, in his inaugural foreign trip, visited Paris and Warsaw to restart relations with both countries. Meanwhile, Poland, traditionally aligned with the US, finds itself unexpectedly sidelined and may welcome deeper European defense ties. France, claiming its status as the EU's sole nuclear power, signed the Treaty of Aachen with Germany in 2019 and the Treaty of Nancy with Poland in 2025, both containing mutual assistance obligations beyond NATO's Article 5, including nuclear deterrence. This marks an emerging strategic autonomy for the Triangle from the US, promoting further collaboration. However, so far, each country has continued to pursue divergent policies, creating differing security and fiscal conditions but also strategic complementarities.

Trinational Comparison of Defense Spending

Over the past 25 years, the military landscape within the Weimar Triangle has undergone substantial transformation, with Germany, France, and Poland pursuing distinct defense policies. These differences reflect varying strategic priorities and levels of investment, resulting in divergent security postures and fiscal conditions across the three countries. Table 1 provides an overview.

Germany's troop numbers have dropped from 319,000 in 2000 to approximately 180,000 today. Over two decades, military spending as a percentage of total government expenditure remained between 2.5 and 2.8 percent. Consequently, Germany's military budget as a share of GDP was notably low, only recently approaching NATO's 2 percent target, with per capita military expenditure reaching EUR 960 in 2024. This increase is largely attributed to a EUR 100 billion debt-financed special fund, initiated in 2022 to modernize the armed forces and directed toward acquiring domestic and American weapons like F-35 fighter jets, CH-47 transport helicopters, and air defense systems. Notably, however, both voluntary recruitment and procurement have progressed sluggishly. Meanwhile, France halved its troop numbers from 400,000 in 2000, yet it maintained a higher level of military capability than Germany and Poland. Consistently meeting NATO's 2 percent GDP target, France dedicates over 3 percent of its government spending to defense and heavily relies on its domestic defense industry. However, its per capita military spending has declined to just under EUR 900, now the lowest among the three nations.

Poland presents the most dramatic transformation. After cutting its armed forces from about 190,000 in 2000 to around half that number in 2015, it has since expanded its personnel to approximately 216,000, making it now NATO's third-largest standing force. Poland's armed forces expansion is reflected in its military spending, which has soared from around 2 to 4.2 percent of GDP, indicating a strategic shift toward substantial enhancement. Approximately one out of every twelve zlotys of government expenditure goes to defense, totaling about EUR 900 per capita. Considering economic and purchasing power differences, this equates to about EUR 1,395 for Germany and EUR 1,435 for France. Poland has significantly increased its military acquisitions, replacing Soviet-era equipment with NATO-compatible systems. The country has secured over 300 tanks, attack helicopters, artillery systems, missiles, air defense systems, and F-35 fighter jets from the US. It also acquired 1,000 tanks, artillery systems, and light combat aircraft from South Korea, and early warning aircraft and surveillance ships from

¹ In addition, many industrial initiatives aim to build a robust defense industrial ecosystem. Member states of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) work on projects focusing on air defense, cyber resilience, and military mobility. Supporting PESCO, the European Defence Fund allocates EUR 7.3 billion (2021–27) for defense innovation while the European Defence Industrial Strategy and Programme (EUR 1.5 billion, 2025–27) encourages joint procurement. Efforts like the European Defence Industry Reinforcement (EDIRPA) (EUR 300 million) and Ammunition Production Act (EUR 500 million) address urgent capability gaps, while the Strategic Compass outlines a decade-long action plan (cf. Directorate-General Defence Industry and Space 2025).

Sweden. Additionally, Poland is bolstering its domestic arms industry through a “polonization” initiative, producing infantry fighting vehicles, armored vehicles, artillery, and drones (Adamowski 2025). This transformation is accompanied by a commitment to increase the size of its armed forces to 300,000 personnel and strengthen its defensive capabilities – for instance, through the 2024 initiated East Shield program to fortify its eastern borders – making Poland a continental defense heavyweight.

From a comparative perspective, Poland is already operationalizing large-scale rearmament, whereas Germany has only recently begun to follow suit. In contrast, France’s defense policy has seen little change, likely reflecting the nation’s self-perception as a long-standing military world power with, as French President Macron called it, “the most effective army in Europe” (Macron 2025). While France’s continuity is grounded in its nuclear deterrent and defense industrial autonomy, Poland’s ambition is driven by proximity to conflict and heightened historical threat perception vis-à-vis Russia. In 2022 Poland announced its intention to become “the most powerful land force in Europe” (NFP 2022). Germany, caught in between, faces pressure to match ambition with effective implementation and a difficult past. Nevertheless, German Chancellor Merz announced in his first government statement that the German army should “become

the strongest conventional army in Europe” (Merz 2025). Yet such goals raise two questions: first, which defense measures should be implemented to enhance security, and second, what is each country’s fiscal space to pursue these ambitions in a way that ensures both strategic and fiscal measures sustain public support?

Enhancing Military Capabilities with Public Support

Addressing the question of how to strengthen defense capabilities with public support, recent evidence from Germany offers valuable insights with broader implications for France and Poland. A representative discrete choice experiment by Qari, Börger, Lohse, and Meyerhoff (2024) surveyed 1,800 participants to assess their monetary valuation of measures aimed at enhancing defense capabilities. The analysis first explored various scenarios for increasing German troop strength. Relative to the status quo, the most preferred option was a 25 percent increase to nearly 230,000 soldiers, which received the highest valuation of EUR 3.4 billion. To realize such an increase in troop numbers, reinstating compulsory military service presents itself as a logical option. Currently, this measure is suspended not only in Germany, but also in France and Poland. However, public support for the policy is divided and tends to waver when it comes with a “price tag.” Approximately one-third of respondents showed a moderate

Table 1
Military Expenditure and Troop Size for the Years 2000–24

		2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2024
Troop size (in thousand)	France	394	357	234	205	208	204
	Germany	319	246	235	177	184	181
	Poland	191	150	100	99	116	216
Military expenditure as percentage of government spending	France	4.0%	3.7%	3.4%	3.2%	3.3%	3.6%
	Germany	2.8%	2.6%	2.6%	2.5%	2.7%	3.9%
	Poland	4.2%	4.4%	4.0%	5.1%	4.7%	8.5%
Military expenditure per capita (in current EUR)	France	520	582.6	621.1	633.7	710.2	894.2
	Germany	350.2	349.7	401.7	421	557.8	960.8
	Poland	89.2	124.5	174.6	240.2	314	903.1
Military expenditure as percentage of GDP	France	2.1%	2.0%	2.0%	1.9%	2.0%	2.1%
	Germany	1.3%	1.2%	1.2%	1.1%	1.4%	1.9%
	Poland	1.8%	1.9%	1.8%	2.1%	2.3%	4.2%

Source: NATO, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; Authors’ calculations.

willingness to financially support compulsory service. In contrast, 43 percent were unwilling to contribute any financial resources, and nearly one-quarter strictly opposed the policy. An analysis of socioeconomic characteristics shows that these are mainly younger and left-leaning respondents (Lohse, Börger, Meyerhoff, and Qari 2023, 2025). From a macroeconomic perspective, compulsory service would also be expensive, with an estimated annual reduction in German GDP of up to EUR 70 billion (Adema, Poutvaara, Schlepper, and Wochner 2025). Interestingly, the German public expresses strong support for multilateral approaches to defense: forming a European army and establishing a capital-intensive European air defense shield were well-received, valued at EUR 3 billion and EUR 7.2 billion, respectively.

Börger, Lohse, Meyerhoff, and Qari (2025) further explore psychological factors, showing that individuals concerned about foreign policy threats are more willing to support defense measures. In the Weimar Triangle, perceived threats differ due to geographical distance from the Ukraine conflict and Russia. This variance may not only explain why France has been less involved in rearmament compared to Germany and notably less so than Poland. It also implies a difference in the fiscal space for additional defense spending and, as discussed next, the acceptance of financing policies across the Triangle.

The Triangle's Fiscal Outlook

Amid rising pressure to scale up military capabilities – codified in NATO's new 5 percent target – the question of how to finance such efforts has become a central concern. Table 2 outlines relevant fiscal indicators from 2000 to projected values in 2030.

France consistently runs significant fiscal deficits, projected to remain at 6.1 percent by 2030. Consequently, government debt is anticipated to rise from 50.7 percent of GDP in 2000 to 120.3 percent by 2030, reflecting structural fiscal imbalances. Public spending remains high, peaking at 61.7 percent of GDP, but is not supported by commensurate economic growth, with real GDP growth expected to modestly recover to 1.2 percent by 2030. This raises concerns about debt sustainability and future fiscal space. Germany, demonstrating greater fiscal discipline, has maintained moderate deficits. Currently, the deficit stands at around 3 percent but is projected to increase by half by 2030. Debt levels may climb by 10 percentage points by 2030 due to additional debt-financed infrastructure and defense spending. Public spending is expected to rise to 52.1 percent within five years, although growth prospects are limited, with GDP growth anticipated at only 0.7 percent by 2030. Poland, like France, consistently carries a significant budget defi-

Table 2

Overview of Public Finance for the Years 2000–30

		2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
Government deficit/ surplus as percentage of GDP	France	-1.3%	-3.5%	-7.2%	-3.9%	-8.9%	-5.5%	-6.1%
	Germany	-1.7%	-3.4%	-4.4%	0.9%	-4.4%	-3.0%	-4.4%
	Poland	-4.0%	-3.9%	-7.4%	-2.6%	-6.9%	-6.2%	-3.6%
Government debt as percentage of GDP	France	50.7%	59.8%	75.4%	88.6%	101.6%	108.2%	120.3%
	Germany	59.2%	67.1%	81.0%	71.2%	68.0%	65.4%	74.9%
	Poland	36.3%	46.5%	53.7%	51.1%	56.6%	60.7%	67.7%
Public spending as percentage of GDP	France	52.6%	54.3%	57.7%	57.6%	61.7%	57.3%	57.5%
	Germany	48.1%	46.9%	48.1%	44.5%	51.1%	49.9%	52.1%
	Poland	42.9%	44.1%	46.0%	41.5%	47.7%	50.1%	47.4%
GDP growth rate (real)	France	4.4%	2.0%	1.8%	1.0%	-7.6%	0.6%	1.2%
	Germany	2.9%	0.9%	4.1%	1.7%	-4.1%	0.0%	0.7%
	Poland	4.3%	3.3%	3.2%	4.4%	-2.0%	3.2%	2.7%

Source: IMF, World Economic Outlook Database. Estimates for 2025 and 2030.

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cit, which is currently at 6.2 percent but expected to decrease to 3.6 percent by 2030. Government debt has increased from 36.3 percent of GDP in 2000 to about 60 percent today. With a projected rise to 67.7 percent by 2030, it remains lower than France's and comparable to Germany's. Public spending has gradually increased from 42.9 percent to 50.1 percent by 2025 but is expected to decline thereafter. Economically, Poland exhibits dynamic growth, with real GDP growth consistently above 3 percent until 2015 and an estimated 2.7 percent by 2030.

Economic theory offers insights into defense financing. While first-best Lindahl taxation is impractical, second-best models aim to minimize distortions. Tax smoothing suggests debt financing for temporary shocks, especially when military spending has a high fiscal multiplier. Yet borrowing is limited by fiscal space, the room for public spending without risking debt sustainability. When constrained, governments must rely on tax hikes or spending cuts, with the latter typically less recessive. The classic "guns versus butter" trade-off reflects opportunity costs from diverting civilian resources, though heightened security needs may justify these. Globally, armaments since at least the 19th century have primarily been financed through debt issuance but with a growing role for tax hikes and budget reallocations under high-intensity armaments and less fiscal space (Bolouri, Lohse, and Qari 2025a). However, sustaining any financing policy also requires public support. Political economy research suggests that borrowing is generally more publicly acceptable than taxation or austerity. Bolouri, Lohse, and Qari (2025b) examine this (mis)conception and reveal a more nuanced pattern for Germany: individuals who place a high value on defense tend to support deficit-neutral budgeting through tax-financed increases, while those who perceive lower welfare gains from defense prefer debt financing to avoid immediate personal costs.

France now faces a dilemma due to escalating fiscal challenges with persistent deficits, rising debt, a relatively large public sector, and weak economic growth. Its hopes for substantial joint EU borrowing appear dashed, given the meager EUR 150 billion from ReArm Europe. Without tax hikes, any meaningful increase in France's defense budget would require a reprioritization of existing expenditures, likely impacting social programs and triggering the "guns versus butter" dilemma, posing political risks and potentially eroding public support. Poland's total debt, in contrast, appears more sustainable, allowing for further budget increases through debt financing. However, its annual deficit is already subject to European review. Germany has maintained relatively stable fiscal discipline, enabling it to debt finance military expenditu-

res above 1 percent of GDP. Yet, combined with its new EUR 500 billion infrastructure fund, debt levels are being pushed higher, also raising questions about compliance with EU fiscal rules. To sustain such defense spending, both Germany and Poland might need to increase taxes or reduce other expenditures over time – something that should be politically more viable than in France due to greater threat perception. Recent evidence shows that about three-quarters of Germans support at least partial tax financing and 86 percent support at least partial budget consolidation (Bolouri et al. 2025b).

Policy Conclusion

Amid global disruptions, bolstering European strategic autonomy, especially militarily, has become the crucial policy. Effective responses require close, structured collaboration, yet the EU struggles with slow, divided action. The Weimar Triangle, with a more closely aligned narrative and complementary capabilities, seems to offer a promising framework for advancing cooperation and enhancing Europe's security. That said, the Weimar Triangle itself is not without its hurdles. Cross-border arms purchases have yet to materialize, with Poland opting against German tanks, Germany shying away from French jets, and no one acquiring Polish drones. Divergent fiscal conditions and worldviews further complicate matters. While Poland faces immediate threats from neighboring Russia and Belarus, France also perceives security challenges from more distant regions, including the Pacific and Africa. Additionally, Poland's recent presidential election introduces political uncertainty. The newly elected president, who is perceived as less supportive of European integration, holds significant power, serving as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and retaining veto authority over policy initiatives. These dynamics are evolving and bear watching.

Nonetheless, differences may also serve as catalysts for European cooperation in burden sharing. Since defense is not solely a matter of resource allocation but also of the public's support and mindset, a multilateral division of labor offers strategic complementarity: Germany, facing stagnant voluntary recruitment and sluggish procurement, provides great fiscal space and public willingness to fund European capital investments. This complements France, which faces tight fiscal constraints yet retains a strong defense industry and provides nuclear autonomy. Poland benefits strategically from its European neighbors' international influence, deterrence, and industrial capacity while contributing with its emphasis on scaling and deploying a large continental force, supported by broad public acceptance of military service. By leveraging these

complementarities for coordinated defense policies – rather than focusing solely on nation states – the Weimar Triangle holds significant potential as a dynamic vehicle for securing Europe's strategic autonomy, defense readiness, and – most importantly – peace. •

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