

# Anarchy in the international system: A new era of realism?

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Russia's aggression has reshaped the global order and pushed Germany to move beyond its long-held identity as a purely civilian power. The *Zeitenwende* marks a turn toward realism — rearmament, European leadership in defense, and a redefined international role of Germany that combines hard and soft power in an increasingly multipolar world.

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### The Darkening of International Relations

The geopolitical turn in international relations (IR)—marked by a renewed emphasis on coercion, transactionalism, hard power, and spheres of influence—has revived a fundamental concept long dormant in the field: anarchy. Before the war in Ukraine, for many observers, anarchy appeared to have been largely relegated, neutralized by an expanding body of international legal norms and a cooperative habitus deeply embedded in much of the world. At least in Europe—the most constructivist region in the world—violent rivalry between states had largely been contained and transformed within the framework of the EU. From Brussels, Berlin, Paris, or Madrid, it seemed that the European Union's liberal institutionalism—the belief that anarchy could be overcome through international organizations and agreements based on free trade, universal suffrage, civil liberties, and sovereign equality—would eventually be embraced by the rest of the world as the superior model for interstate relations. History, it seemed, would continue to move in the right direction as long as the European Union prospered, and the EU viewed itself as the embodiment of what Hanns Maull (2007) termed a “civilian

power” (Zivilmacht). Nowhere was this belief more deeply held than in Berlin—the soft-power superpower.

However, this liberal-institutionalist worldview made it difficult for Europeans to grasp why other regions of the world perceived their surroundings – and the international order more broadly – in fundamentally different ways. Higher levels of mistrust among state actors outside Europe, combined with their proximity to illiberal geoeconomic poles in an increasingly multipolar world, meant that non-Western regions were better prepared for the new international order. What Europe perceives as a “darkening” of international relations can appear, from other regions, as the continuation and reinforcement of long-standing strategies and power structures. As the old realist maxim reminds us, “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides). The non-European world has long experienced a more anarchic reality than Europe—or at least than the version of Europe that emerged after 1945.

It is clear that the war in Ukraine has disrupted not only Europe's security order but also, more profoundly, the EU's conception of its role in the world. The notion of restoring amicable relations with Russia through open channels of

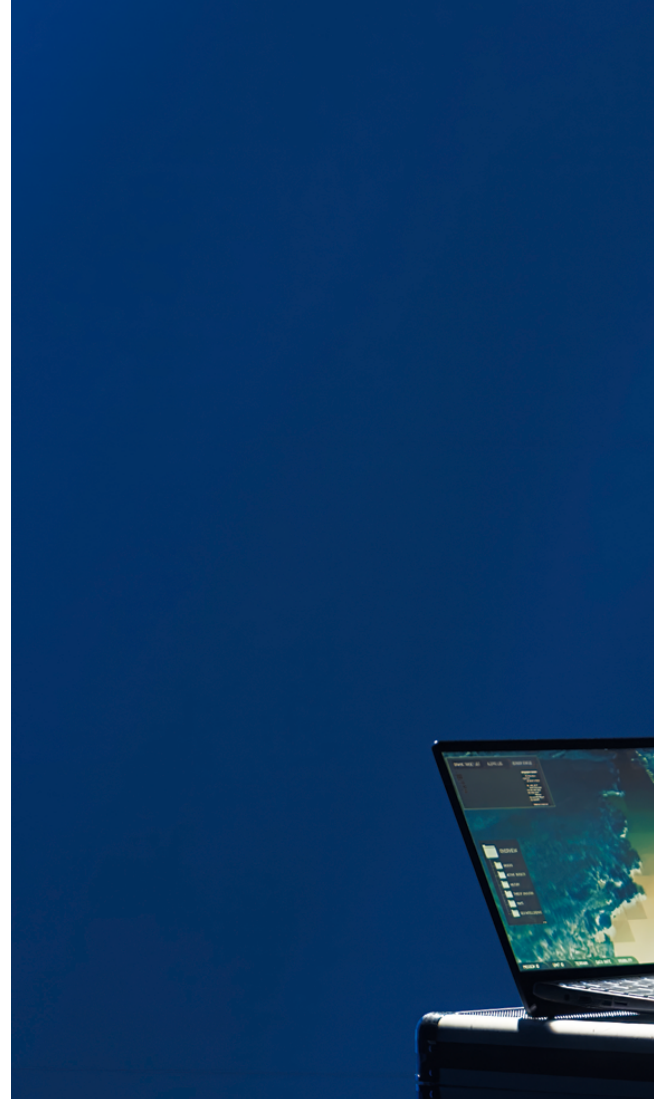
communication and restrictions on Ukraine's offensive potential has, at present, come to be viewed as a form of appeasement toward Moscow. This behavior, however, stemmed from the liberal-institutionalist mindset of interdependence—symbolized until 2022 by the “partnership for modernization” (Modernisierungspartnerschaft)—and rooted in the 1990s conviction that economic exchange (natural gas for technology) would catalyze liberalization and stability in Russia (Scianna 2024). The key question, then, is what the escalating great-power rivalry and the emergence of this new geopolitical era mean for German foreign policy and, by extension, for European foreign policy.

## A Displaced World Order and the Emerging Authoritarian Coalition

*China and the United States  
are rewriting the global rules*

Despite the grim realities of the full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022, the current strategic challenge to the liberal international order operates along two main axes. First, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has abandoned the path of a “peaceful rise” and assumed a far more assertive role, both regionally and globally. Second, under the Trump administration, the United States abandoned its role as a “status quo power” and started actively rewriting the rules of global governance, especially in trade and security. Since 2016, Carlo Masala has referred to this new reality as a “global disorder” (Masala 2025).

Regionally – particularly in the South China Sea – Beijing has pursued a more forceful posture, even while sustaining deeply interconnected and broadly benign trade relations with neighboring states



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for more than twenty years. Despite their complicated historical relations with China, Taiwan and Japan emerged as the country's main sources of foreign direct investment.



However, following its 2009 assertion of sovereignty over the majority of the South China Sea—including the Paracel and Spratly Islands, along with Taiwan and the Senkaku/Diaoyu (or the Pinnacle) Islands—through the “nine-dash line,” China began fortifying islets in the area, increasing the frequency of clashes with Philippine and Japanese coast guard forces. All this is happening as Beijing undertakes major modernization efforts to turn the People’s Liberation Army into a world-class military force able to rival that of the United States (Stumbaum/de Cet 2025).

China’s neighbors—from ASEAN to Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, as well as India, Australia, and the Pacific states—have responded to Beijing’s growing assertiveness through various hedging strategies, including bilateral free trade agreements, multi-alignment, and increasingly deep security cooperation with the United States (Short 2025).

At the same time, countries across the region have sharply expanded their defense budgets. Notable modernization initiatives are underway among ASEAN members—most prominently Vietnam—and NATO+ partners such as Japan, South Korea, and,

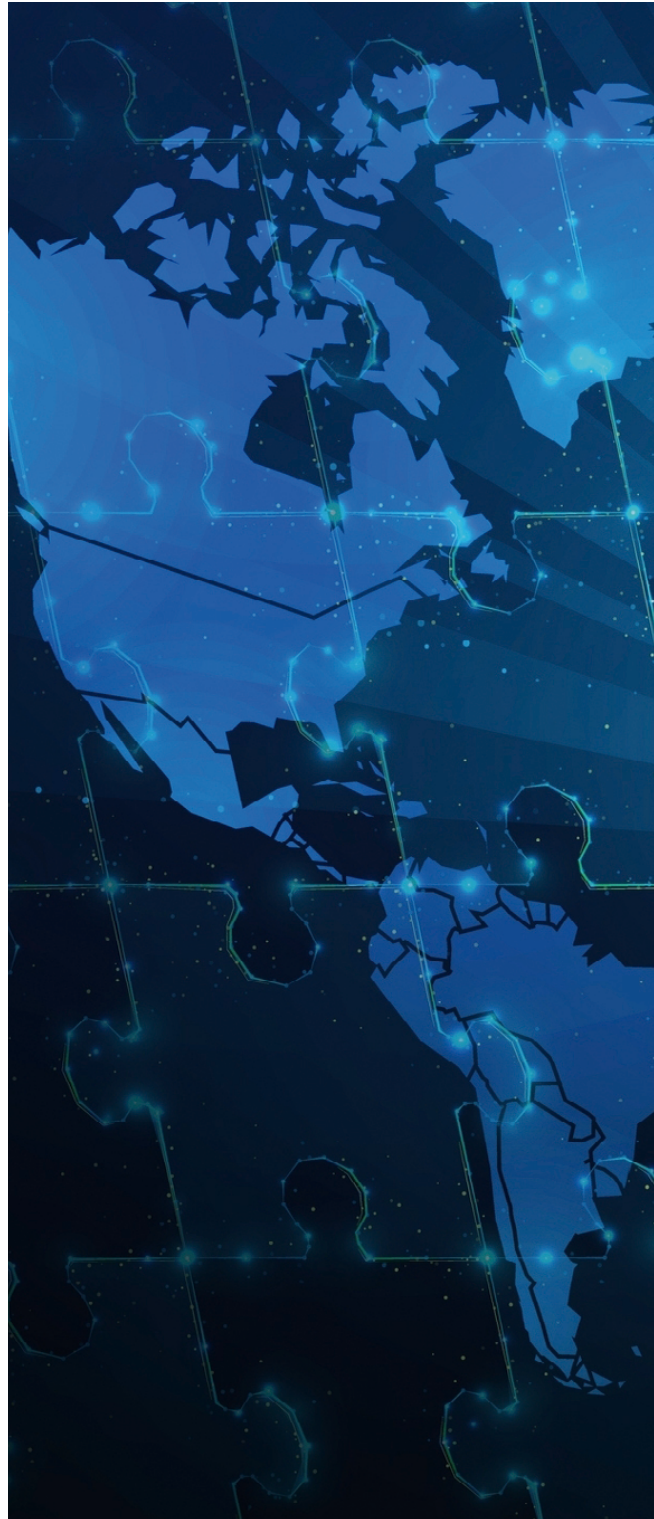
increasingly, Australia. Nevertheless, these efforts remain comparatively limited when measured against the scope of Beijing's defense modernization.

Finally, major extra-regional powers—including Germany— have expanded their presence in the South China Sea through joint exercises and freedom of navigation operations aimed at upholding international law and reinforcing regional and global norms of conduct (Grossmann 2020). Tensions, therefore, continue to rise.

### *China's offensive in international organisations*

On the global stage, China has spent the past two decades steadily challenging Western dominance in international organizations. It has done so, for instance, by promoting the appointment of Chinese nationals to key positions in institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); by obstructing the dispute settlement mechanism of the World Trade Organization (WTO); and by assuming a more prominent role in the global fight against climate change, both within and beyond the framework of the Paris Agreement.

Beijing has also established “parallel organizations”, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), founded in 2015 to rival the Japan-led Asian Development Bank (ADB), which was established in 1966 and modeled on the World Bank. Beijing's ambition to become a “polar power” by 2030, its leading role in the recently expanded BRICS group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as its Global Governance Initiative (GGI), all underscore China's expanding international profile (Lagarda 2025). Other examples include the ambitious Belt and





Road Initiative (BRI)—possibly the largest infrastructure development initiative in history—and China’s growing influence in Latin America. Grounded in economic interdependence but reinforced by sustained military diplomacy, both initiatives have enabled Beijing to achieve a significant degree of political influence in participating countries.

*Trump’s transactional order  
and the authoritarian international*

In response to China’s ascent, the Trump administration used America’s dominant position in the global economy to shape a new geoeconomic order – one that was more transactional and less institutionalized. Washington’s capacity for economic, political, and military coercion—evident in the use of tariffs as an economic weapon (India, Brazil, USMCA), the strategic deployment of military aid (through NATO and to Ukraine), and threats of intervention (toward Mexico and Venezuela)—has enabled it to secure concessions from both allies and adversaries.

Washington’s shift in military posture across the Western Hemisphere aims to reinforce the Monroe Doctrine and could prove decisive in a more militarized campaign against the transnational narco-economy. In the not-too-distant future, it may also push economic competitors out of its sphere of influence. The global consequences have been significant: the United Nations system is in disarray, emerging powers are deepening their multi-alignment strategies beyond Washington’s sphere, and NATO’s European members are bolstering their strategic autonomy in case of a U.S. military pullback.

Levels of trust toward Washington have fallen dramatically. Its new posture could leave the United States with fewer allies

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and increased international isolation. In an increasingly multipolar world, China has succeeded in establishing a sphere of influence and building an international coalition of like-minded states, while the United States has, through its use of coercive tools, undermined the liberal international order and effectively renounced its role as a global leader (Daalder/Lindsay 2018).

For Europeans, this new United States will remain a challenging partner, which in turn heightens the importance of Europe’s relations with like-minded countries in Latin America and the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration’s shifting and unpredictable support for Ukraine complicates internal EU negotiations on strengthening defense policy, as European states are increasingly required to shoulder a larger share of military aid to Kyiv. This has diverted European attention from Beijing’s efforts to construct an alternative global order, which, while less immediate, pose a deeper and more enduring challenge for Europe, given its reliance on an effective multilateral system. Meanwhile, Russia has deepened its alliances with China, North Korea, and Iran to sustain its war against Ukraine. Moscow is pursuing the creation of an “authoritarian international,” composed of the CSTO military alliance with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,



and Armenia; Iranian-supplied armed drones; North Korean artillery; and dual-use technologies provided by Beijing. Angela Stent has termed this emergent grouping “CRINK” (Stent 2025).

### Germany’s Multinational Response to Russian Hegemony

*The Zeitenwende:  
from incrementalism to radical change*

Germany’s response to the rise of the so-called “authoritarian international” has primarily taken the form of a strengthening of its conventional defense posture, with particular emphasis on NATO’s eastern flank. Germany’s defense budget began to rise gradually after 2014, following Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (Sasse 2023). However, these gradual measures were insufficient to significantly enhance the Bundeswehr’s deterrence capabilities, which continue to suffer from critical gaps and a shortage of strategic enablers (Burilkov/Rieck 2023).

The situation changed at the end of February 2022, when, just days after Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that Europe was undergoing a *Zeitenwende*—a historic turning point in defense policy (Bundesregierung 2022). In response, he established a €100 billion special fund (Sondervermögen) aimed at modernizing the Bundeswehr and reconstituting Germany’s territorial defense capabilities. For the Bundeswehr, this represented a profound transformation, after nearly three decades of structuring its organization, training, and equipment around stabilization missions abroad (Neitzel 2025: 100–105). At the European level, Germany also moved swiftly:

❖ **Por primera vez en la historia del ejército alemán, tropas alemanas se estacionarán de forma permanente fuera del territorio nacional, en una región que fue ocupada por la Wehrmacht durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial.** ❖

in August 2022, it launched the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), envisioned as an integrated air and missile defense system for the continent.

*Brigade in Lithuania  
and the Berlin-Warsaw Axis*

The most tangible manifestation of this paradigm shift in security and defense is the German-led deployment of a new heavy brigade in Lithuania. For the first time in the history of the German army, German troops will be permanently stationed outside national territory—and, notably, in a region once occupied by the Wehrmacht during World War II. In 2026, NATO’s current multinational Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Lithuania will be incorporated into this new 45th Armored Brigade. Although the deployment will strengthen the defense of the Baltic states—whose armed forces are limited in size – doubts persist about NATO’s ability to supply them through the Suwałki Corridor or by sea in wartime conditions, given the proximity of Russia’s Kaliningrad stronghold.

The new federal government, led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz, has introduced

a second special fund for the armed forces, a sustained increase in defense spending to 3.5% of GDP over the coming years (€83 billion in 2024), and the reintroduction of compulsory military service (Bundesregierung 2025). Germany will thus once again possess the largest conventional army in Europe and, in the event of conflict, serve as a logistical “turntable” for reinforcing NATO’s eastern flank.

Close ties with Poland under Prime Minister Donald Tusk—reinforced by mechanisms such as the Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin—provide a strong foundation for this role. There is strong consensus between Berlin and Warsaw, particularly on defense matters, such that Germany’s *Zeitenwende* complements Poland’s significant rearmament, also focused on NATO’s eastern flank: Poland’s defense budget increased from \$10 billion in 2014 to \$15 billion in 2022, reaching \$38 billion in 2024 (World Bank 2025).

#### *Europe strengthens its defence architecture*

In line with its traditional foreign policy approach, Berlin has taken advantage of the *Zeitenwende* to reinforce European integration mechanisms, advancing a more capable defense posture within the EU and consolidating Germany’s central role in NATO (Rathke/Luetkefend 2025). U.S. pressure and the challenges arising from the war in Ukraine have prompted European allies to commit to substantial increases in defense spending—up to 3.5% of GDP for core military capabilities, plus an additional 1.5% for associated civil infrastructure.

This revitalization of NATO has coincided with another *Zeitenwende*, perhaps even more consequential, within Brussels itself. Since 2019, the self-styled “Geopolitical

» **Alemania se ha concebido a sí misma como una potencia civil (*Zivilmacht*): una potencia media benigna que, invierte en instituciones regionales y globales para proveer bienes públicos globales.**«

Commission,” chaired by Ursula von der Leyen, has enhanced the role of the European Defence Agency (EDA) in military planning, research, and development. In addition, the European Peace Facility (EPF), an extra-budgetary mechanism designed for conflict prevention, has been converted into a funding source for Ukraine’s arms procurement – given that EU treaties forbid using the EU budget for military purposes. In October 2023, it launched EDIRPA, a European law to strengthen the defense industry through the joint procurement of military equipment.

In 2024, the EU established its first Commissioner for Defense, and in May 2025, it launched the *Security Action for Europe* (SAFE), a supranational financial instrument designed to speed up the defense readiness of Member States. This instrument enables urgent and strategic investments in the European defense industry, with particular emphasis on critical capabilities (European Commission 2025). This does not constitute a militarization of the EU, but rather represents a significant shift in its function as a strategic actor in European defense. By opening these instruments to non-NATO partners, the EU also aims to strengthen ties with like-minded states beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere, particularly in the technological

domain, which could represent a significant opportunity for the European defense sector in the Indo-Pacific (Besch 2025) and, to a lesser extent, in Latin America.

The war against Ukraine is testing the resolve of NATO, a military alliance that, at least in Europe, has operated in a peacekeeping mode since the end of the Cold War. The size of the armed forces has been considerably reduced, the operational readiness of military equipment remains limited, procurement procedures are slow, and the defense industry's production capacity is insufficient. While the recent changes have been both profound and necessary, their implementation has been slow, prompting some observers to speak of the "death" of the *Zeitenwende* (Tallis 2024). Limitations persist in both industrial capacity for weapons production and military recruitment, although financing is no longer the critical bottleneck it was before 2022 (Matlé 2025).

## Redefining its Foreign Policy Self-conception

*From Zivilmacht to realism: redefining German power*

Germany needs to redefine its self-conception and its role in a global context where the conditions for projecting soft power are rapidly deteriorating. Since reunification in 1990, Berlin has carved out a distinctive role in international relations: emphasizing soft power and non-coercive influence, it has prioritized development cooperation, science diplomacy, and economic interdependence as functional substitutes for power politics.

Within this framework, Germany has viewed itself as a civil power (*Zivilmacht*): a benign middle power that, through

diplomacy, development, and defense, invests in regional and global institutions to provide global public goods. Its leadership in climate diplomacy and its position as one of the world's largest donors of official development assistance clearly reflect this role.

This set of liberal and institutionalist foreign policy tools was well suited to the early post-Cold War decades and helped consolidate Germany's position as one of the world's leading economic and political powers. However, this success also reinforced a self-conception that, grounded in values Berlin regarded as universally benign, has often resulted in a notable degree of moralism.

This conception of *Zivilmacht*, while still valid—since the provision of global public goods continues to rely on collective and consensual action—is nevertheless insufficient in the face of the current rivalry among major powers (Maull 2025). In order for German civil power to maintain its influence, its liberal-institutionalist core must be complemented by tougher realist components.

In other words, soft power requires hard power as its foundation, serving as the foundation that allows it to be projected effectively in the current geopolitical environment. Other middle powers, such as the United Kingdom and France, learned this lesson long ago; for Germany's political elites and civil society, however, it demands a profound reassessment of the values and interests shaping its foreign policy. In this

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context, the war in Ukraine has effectively opened the door to a genuine *Zeitenwende*: a fundamental paradigm shift in German defense policy.

#### *Strategic solidarity with the enlarged West*

Confronted with illiberal coalitions and authoritarian associations like CRINK, Germany's defense spending can be seen as a contribution to NATO's collective burden-sharing, enabling other allies to concentrate on the Indo-Pacific region. These actions also serve as signals of Germany's commitment to NATO+ partners in the region (alliance signaling), demonstrating strategic solidarity and reinforced by a larger—though non-aggressive—presence of the German Armed Forces.

The concept of strategic solidarity within an “enlarged West” also offers a useful framework for German policy toward Latin America: neither Germany nor Europe can play a leading role in the region's security policy, since military cooperation with the United States—except in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—is highly institutionalized and, despite periodically resurgent anti-American rhetoric, generally accepted.

The potential for cooperation with Europe also lies in the areas of strategic raw materials—particularly lithium and rare earths—trade, and technology. Given China's economic influence in Latin America and Europe's reliance on Chinese primary goods to achieve technological autonomy, the EU–Mercosur free trade agreement no longer appears as a partnership grounded in shared democratic values, but rather as a pragmatic process of geo-economic risk reduction (de-risking) for both regions.

The FTA enhances the economic, technological, and ultimately military

» **Puede que el mundo se esté volviendo más anárquico, pero, como decía Alexander Wendt (1992), la anarquía sigue siendo lo que los Estados hacen de ella.** «

resilience of the broader West. In my view, this should involve greater cooperation on armaments with Latin American states seeking partnerships for military modernization – which would at least require, as in the Indo-Pacific, a liberalization of Germany's arms export policy.

#### *Global alliances for an anarchic world*

Despite its shortcomings, the *Zeitenwende* represents a crucial milestone in German foreign policy, as it can revitalize Germany's hard power not only within European and transatlantic frameworks, but also globally, where it may amplify its traditional soft power.

Like the emerging international alignments, this realistic rethinking must also adopt a genuinely global perspective: it entails redefining Germany's alliances, complementing traditional partnerships—based on shared values within the G7 and among democratic partners—with more transactional arrangements with like-minded countries in other regions, particularly Latin America and the Asia-Pacific, where many *stakeholders* in the liberal international order are concentrated.

Although Germany may not be able to offer cooperative frameworks comparable to AUKUS—where the United States transfers

nuclear submarine technology to Australia—this new approach requires rethinking its foreign policy tools and adopting a more realistic perspective: redesigning policies on aid, science and technology, and arms exports to provide more attractive avenues for cooperation in areas that are priorities for its partners. Many of these lessons must be—and are already beginning to be—integrated into strategic planning in Brussels, NATO, and the EU.

Major non-NATO allies such as Japan and Australia, as well as Argentina and Brazil, deserve far greater attention from Berlin and Brussels, as they lie on the front lines of great-power competition. I believe this calls for a more robust German hard power foundation: militarily effective, capable of global deployment, and coordinated within international alliances and partnerships. The world may be growing more anarchic, yet, as Alexander Wendt (1992) observed, anarchy is ultimately what states choose to make of it. ♦

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