Publications

Europe, America, and the Struggle
for a New Order.

Between War and Peace.



ATLANTIK-BRÜCKE

Between War and Peace.

How global power shifts are changing the role of the West
and how Europe and America are struggling to establish a New Order.

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

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  Strategies and New Approaches to Information Security

2 **Foreword** / Sigmar Gabriel & Julia Friedlander

What's next?

Dear readers, dear members of the Atlantik-Brücke

In October, a delegation from Atlantik-Brücke visited the NATO headquarters in Brussels. During our conversations on site, we discussed the most pressing challenges for the alliance, the state of the transatlantic partnership, and Germany's renewed commitment to strengthening its defense sector. We also gained insights into how the startup ecosystem can contribute to building Germany's defense capacity by providing specific technologies to the state. After the exchange, it was clear to all of us that the world in which we had grown comfortable over past decades no longer exists. But we also recognized that this new world simultaneously sparks the desire to solve problems and invent new solutions.

NATO's primary focus is once again on deterring potential adversary Russia, to prevent any aggression against Europe. In some ways, it feels as if we have returned to a Cold War mindset. We are at a historic crossroads, that much is certain. But what, you may ask, comes next?

Transatlantic Relations Remain Strained

The transatlantic partnership has been notably strained under US President Donald Trump, as core interests and priorities continue to diverge. The introduction of special tariffs and Trump's rigid "America First" trade policy have placed significant strain on economic relations. At the same time, Trump openly questions Europe's defense capabilities. Even after an increase in defense spending by European partners to five percent of GDP, there is considerable uncertainty about the USA's future role in NATO.

Europe, increasingly faced with security policy challenges—such as Russia's repeated provocations on NATO's eastern flank—must urgently strengthen its defense capabilities, yet finds itself under internal political pressure, not least due to the rise of populist movements. Not only in defense policy but also economically, Europe remains dependent on transatlantic ties. It appears likely that the EU's strategic direction will remain fragmented in the future. While pragmatic cooperation in security crises is temporarily conceivable, in the long term, intraregional divisions will prove too burdensome.

Russia and the Challenge to NATO

Putin currently sees no reason to change his strategy. Peace in Ukraine is unlikely to materialize soon. Russia will continue to be at the center of European security concerns in the coming years. Through repeated border violations—including drone attacks on NATO territory—Moscow is testing the political and military cohesion of the West and is increasingly relying on hybrid warfare. Ultimately, Moscow aims to establish a regional zone of influence modeled along the borders of the former Soviet Union. This not only strains NATO, but also significantly shapes European future planning. At the same time, Russia is deepening its cooperation with countries such as North Korea and China in an effort to form multipolar power blocs against the West.

"GERMANY IS CURRENTLY UNDERGOING A SECURITY POLICY PARADIGM SHIFT."

Against this backdrop, Germany is currently undergoing a security policy paradigm shift. The federal government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz aims to make the Bundeswehr Europe's strongest conventional army in the coming years—a strategic objective backed by a significantly increased budget, broad structural reforms, and the recruitment of new personnel.

The Global South and New Independence

In the Global South, claims to leadership are becoming louder, corresponding to the redistribution of economic power. Countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia are increasingly pursuing independent development paths and partnerships. China, of course, is a key anchor here, massively expanding its infrastructure projects and trade links. But Donald Trump's aggressive trade and migration policies have also forced other countries into new cooperations. At the end of August, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met in China. The three countries promised deeper geopolitical cooperation. We do not know whether this anti-Western signal marks the start of a genuine realignment between India and China. What is clear is that a country like India is trying to maintain its geostrategic balance with radical pragmatism, making Europe's approach to values-based foreign policy seem less like yesterday's program and more like something from a past century.

Middle East: Instability and New Power Structures

The Middle East—especially Israel, Iran, and Gaza—remains a region of geopolitical unrest, yet with continually shifting spheres of influence. While the USA, despite its close ties with Israel, seeks closer relations with Gulf states, regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey continue to gain geopolitical significance. The constant in this ever-changing region between Syria and Yemen is its permanent state of unrest, an imbalance in which political power can fragment and reassemble at any given moment. The diplomatic role of Germany should not be underestimated in this power carousel. Israel remains the focus of international attention as it continues to face persistent instability in Gaza. For Europe, the pressing question is how to uphold the fragile ceasefire and ensure humanitarian access. Germany remains explicitly committed to Israel's security and existence as part of its national raison d'état, a position emphasized by Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul. At the same time, many voices in politics and society call for a more nuanced debate, considering the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and growing political pressures within Europe.

AI and Fears of a Crash

Looking to the future today must extend not only to the political but—above all—to the technological realm. The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) contains the promise of rapid technological progress with implications for the distribution of geopolitical power. In the defense sector especially, AI has become a key topic; the Bundeswehr and its European partners are investing heavily in AI-driven systems—from automated analysis of satellite and drone data to optimized logistics processes and autonomous defense systems and scenario analysis. However, the use of AI requires ongoing regulatory and ethical oversight, especially as military applications increasingly push into sensitive dual-use areas. Meanwhile, global competition for semiconductors and access to critical raw materials—especially rare earths—is heightening geopolitical uncertainty.

China, above all, uses export controls as a strategic lever against Western industrialized nations, whose high-tech and defense industries depend on secure supplies. The dependence of Europe and the USA on a few supplier countries carries substantial risks for industrial value chains, defense capabilities, and economic sovereignty. Diversifying supply chains, investing in technological innovation, and forging targeted resource partnerships are therefore central tasks for the future, vital for securing Europe's long-term prosperity and agency.

AI also carries the risk of an investment bubble that could threaten the American—and thus global—financial system. Credit-financed investments in gigantic infrastructure such as data centers and specialized chips already account for a major portion of US economic growth. If they fail to meet expectations, a chain reaction could ensue, spreading from the tech sector to finance and, ultimately, the real economy. Such a crisis would have far-reaching repercussions for consumer confidence, credit markets, and economic growth. Political support and regulatory measures will therefore be crucial for managing risks and unlocking the sustainable potential of AI.

The Threat of Authoritarian Forces

Donald Trump has fundamentally changed the transatlantic partnership. Hoping for a time after Trump is, however, not sound advice for Europe. For the current situation facing Europeans reveals a structural dilemma: the tactic of delaying conflict through appeasing the US President remains a risky and potentially deceptive strategy—regardless of who is in power in Washington. Europe's security architecture is still too dependent on the goodwill of the USA; true European sovereignty is not on the horizon.

Domestic American attacks on democracy—from voting rights restrictions to the erosion of rule-of-law institutions—already have effects beyond the United States. They could serve as blueprints for authoritarian forces in other Western democracies. Polarization and rising populism are weakening social cohesion and, with it, the resilience of democratic systems worldwide. Europe's most important task is thus to learn from the dangers in the USA: by fostering independent institutions, resilient communications structures, and a willingness to take its own responsibility in security and defense policy.

The Future Is Multipolar and Fragmented

With regard to a future Europe, we must abandon the idea that Western hegemony can be sustained. There will no longer be an "old liberal" Europe following in the slipstream of the USA, even if many wish for this out of fear of economic decline and loss of political significance. In an era when China and the Global South are gaining strength, it is becoming ever harder for Europe to defend its interests. But we should finally come to terms with the seriousness of the situation and face the multipolar world order, rather than try to resist it. The coming upheaval will be at least as momentous as the dawn of the age of industrialization. We should strive to actively shape it, not oppose it.

"WITH REGARD TO A FUTURE EUROPE, WE MUST ABANDON THE IDEA THAT WESTERN HEGEMONY CAN BE SUSTAINED."

Atlantik-Brücke can count itself fortunate to have access to a strong network in this fragmented world. We are ready to help solve problems and provide orientation. As always, we count on your commitment and expertise!



Sigmar Gabriel
Chairman



Julia Friedlander
CEO

8 **Editor's Note** / Beate Wild

Impulses for Our World in Transition

Dear readers, dear members of the Atlantik-Brücke

The events of the past year have shown how much our world is changing. Against this backdrop, this year's publication of the Atlantik-Brücke is dedicated to the new global power relations and their influence on global stability. With **Katherina Reiche**, *Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy*, **Carsten Breuer**, *Inspector General of the German Armed Forces*, **Düzen Tekkal**, *journalist and human rights activist*, **Florian Hahn**, *Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office*, and **Claudia Plattner**, *President of the Federal Office for Information Security (BSI)*, we were able to enlist five distinguished personalities who analyze the current state of the world from their respective perspectives.

Four essays and one interview paint a highly topical and multifaceted picture of profound geopolitical upheavals and a security-political realignment that shape our present. This diversity of viewpoints—from digital security to military defense and diplomatic partnerships to civil society's commitment to our democracy—shows how fragile the current state is.

Europe and America Between Cooperation and Competition

Europe and America stand in a field of tension between cooperation and competition, between preserving freedom and the challenge posed by autocratic systems and hybrid threats. The contributions make clear that peace is no longer a given but that strategies at multiple levels are needed today.

Katherina Reiche [→ p. 12] calls for an economic renewal: Germany faces great challenges in global competition. She identifies overregulation, high energy prices, and geopolitical tensions as the main problems. To secure the country's competitiveness and our international role, Reiche demands greater risk-taking—including from companies—bureaucracy reduction, and the development of resilient supply networks.

Carsten Breuer [→ p. 18] analyzes Europe's military and strategic challenges in light of existing and emerging crises and wars. He warns of Putin's neo-imperialistic goals and emphasizes how crucial credible deterrence, a resilient Bundeswehr, and societal responsibility are for Europe's security. Breuer thus provides the security-political perspective on current conflicts, especially in Eastern Europe.

In the interview, **Düzen Tekkal** [→ p. 26] speaks about democratic and social tests. Tekkal sees dangers from the growing influence of authoritarian and populist forces, the global rise of extremism, and polarization through disinformation. She calls for active defense of political culture and democratic values against these threats. Her contribution enriches the publication with a socio-political perspective.

Florian Hahn [→ p. 34] highlights the strategic importance of the transatlantic partnership for Germany and sees the need to forge new alliances and promote the next generation of transatlantic actors. His foreign policy analysis makes clear that close cooperation with the USA—and increasingly with partners in Latin America—is crucial for stability in global crises.

Claudia Plattner [→ p. 42] together with co-author Florian Seiller, places cybersecurity and AI at the center. The two warn of rising cyber threats but also emphasize the great opportunities arising if technological innovations are used to strengthen Europe's digital sovereignty. Their contribution underlines the relevance of digital security in the modern power structure.

What Are the Key Takeaways?

1. **PEACE TODAY IS A MULTIFACETED CONDITION** that encompasses not only military security but also digital, economic, and societal dimensions. Active defense on all these levels is essential to maintain stability.

2. **THE GERMAN ECONOMY FACES GREAT CHALLENGES.** Against the backdrop of a global paradigm shift, Germany must rethink: to become a driver instead of being driven—that is the mission we are on. The turnaround will only succeed if we have the ambition to take risks for our country.

3. **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND CYBERSECURITY** are today central elements of geopolitical power struggles. Europe needs strong strategies for digital sovereignty to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of this technology in global competition.

4. **THE TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP**, despite existing tensions, remains the backbone of the Western security and value order. Its further development and the integration of new alliances are crucial for global stability.

5. **DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL COHESION** worldwide are increasingly undermined by extremism, disinformation, and polarization. Protecting and strengthening democratic values is therefore essential to make democratic societies resilient to these threats.

Ladies and gentlemen, please regard this publication as an invitation to engage with the complex questions of war and peace in an emerging new world order. We wish you valuable insights.

Beate Wild
Director of Communications of the Atlantik-Brücke

12

Essay / Katherina Reiche



“Those who avoid risk miss opportunities”

Global power relations are shifting, geopolitical tensions are rising: Germany therefore needs more willingness to take risks, bureaucracy reduction, and strategic diversification of supply chains. Germany can secure its role as an economic and geopolitical power, but this requires more courage and the readiness to take new paths.

Germany today stands at a crucial turning point. For decades, export strength was the foundation of our economic success and made us one of the leading economic nations with a strong voice in Europe. The ability to export goods and services worldwide was synonymous with economic strength and international influence. But the days when Germany automatically benefited from global growth are over.

The international dynamics have shifted, other countries are developing faster, and the challenges for our economy have become more complex and multifaceted. The causes of this development are as varied as they are profound. Structurally, a thicket of regulations has spread in Germany, increasingly burdening companies. Energy costs have risen due to political decisions and ideological commitments, while the welfare state has expanded further. These factors have weakened the competitiveness of our economy and slowed innovation. Added to this is a cultural component: in Germany, failure is often seen as a stigma, and the willingness to take risks is low. Especially in a time when technological innovations progress ever faster and new business models emerge, this attitude can become a disadvantage. Those who avoid risks miss opportunities—and in a world that is changing ever faster, this is a serious problem.

Changed foreign policy conditions

The international political framework has also fundamentally changed. Trade conflicts, tariffs, and export bans are expressions of a new geoeconomic world order in which economic interconnections increasingly become the arena of geopolitical interests. The USA and China deliberately use economic power as a political instrument, and Germany is at the center of a global tension between open markets and power-political interests.

The forces that once supported our economy now often act against each other, putting our competitiveness under pressure. The economically liberal world order as we knew it is a thing of the past. Today, economic interconnections have become a field of geopolitical tension, and Germany must assert itself in this new reality. In this changed environment, successful economic policy is inseparably linked with an active and strategic foreign economic policy. It is no longer enough to rely on open markets and growth. Rather, we must strategically use our economic strength to help shape international rules and represent our interests.

Stabilizing transatlantic relations, diversifying our trade and supply relations, and strengthening multilateral structures such as the World Trade Organization are central tasks to be tackled decisively.

"TODAY, MORE THAN EVER, THE ECONOMY IS A CENTRAL INSTRUMENT OF GEOPOLITICAL SHAPING."

Deepening the European single market

Europe must become more competitive again. This means reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and deepening the European internal market. Only in this way can we withstand and use the tensions in the global system to our advantage. Resilience arises from competitiveness, and this must again become the guiding principle of European economic policy.

The European Union must once again focus on being a driver of strong competition and no longer see itself as a regulatory brake. Initiatives such as the investment booster and tax reliefs are important steps to increase attractiveness for direct investments and to establish new companies. Foreign greenfield and expansion investments in Germany have recently declined, and the number of settlement projects has also decreased. This shows how urgently action is needed. Security must become a guiding principle, especially in dealing with China. Relations have become more complex, structural imbalances and dependencies threaten to solidify. China has almost monopolized the mining and processing of rare earths and uses this position deliberately as a political

instrument. A well-thought-out risk management and targeted reduction of one-sided dependencies are therefore indispensable.

Germany and Europe must protect their key areas and strengthen the resilience of their economy to be able to exist in an increasingly fragmented and regionalized world order. For the global economy is evolving away from a unified, liberal order towards a system of competing geopolitical blocks. Regional alliances and spheres of influence are gaining importance, protectionist measures and new alliances shape the international order. For Germany and Europe, this means strategically managing economic interconnections, reducing dependencies, and increasing resilience against external shocks.

Free trade agreements offer great opportunities

Diversifying our trade and supply relations is key to keeping supply chains stable and opening up new markets. The free trade agenda of the European Union must be strengthened, and relations with Latin America, the Indo-Pacific, and Africa also offer great opportunities. The MERCOSUR agreement and free trade agreements with Mexico, Indonesia, and other countries are important milestones to open up new sales markets and deepen economic cooperation. At the same time, the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization remains a central anchor of stability, which needs to be strengthened but also reformed. The WTO stabilizes the global trade order and creates predictability and security—values that are particularly important in a world shaped by volatility. Foreign trade promotion and development cooperation must be more strategically aligned. Funding programs should be targeted at the needs of companies and also include new sectors such as the security and defense industry. Development cooperation must contribute to competitiveness, for example through support for large infrastructure projects and the development of new raw material sources.

“WE MUST BE PREPARED TO CHALLENGE OLD WAYS OF THINKING AND BREAK NEW GROUND.”

Cross-departmental working groups dealing with project awards, raw materials, and Africa are an important step to intensify cooperation and exploit synergies. Today, economy is more than ever a central instrument of geopolitical design. Energy, infrastructure, technology, and supply chains are no longer only issues for companies but also for states. Governments worldwide no longer only secure their borders but also networks, data flows, and raw material sources. This

is where the world order of tomorrow is decided, and Germany must be ready to actively represent its interests.

The state must ensure stable conditions

The challenges are great, but they also offer opportunities. Germany has proven in the past that it can master crises and reinvent itself repeatedly. The ability to adapt, drive innovation, and open up new markets is part of our economic DNA. But for this, we must be willing to question old mindsets and take new paths. This means showing courage, taking risks, and accepting failure as part of the innovation process. Only in this way can we master the technological transformation and secure our competitiveness in the long term.

The role of the state is clear: it must provide stable conditions that offer companies planning security and investment incentives, without paralyzing the economy through excessive regulation. Politics must have the courage to consistently implement reforms to make Germany future-proof. Debates on lifetime working hours, social security, bureaucracy, and defense capability must not be shied away from. Control over money and goods flows, infrastructures, and key technologies becomes the central lever of power. Companies are no longer merely objects of state policy but central actors themselves in the global competition for resources and influence.

They must adapt their business models to the new realities, drive innovation, and seek international partnerships. Digitalization and globalization offer enormous opportunities but also require flexibility and readiness for change. Germany must assert itself as a strong, resilient, and innovative economic power. This requires courage, determination, and willingness to take new paths. Only if we preserve and further develop our economic strength can we influence the new world order and represent our interests.

The world out there will be better if Germany has influence in it. Our economic strength will also be the foundation for this in the future.

PUBLICATIONS

18

Essay / Carsten Breuer

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KFOR
BREUER

“A whole-of-society effort”

We stand at the threshold of a new world order. For more than 30 years, we have lived in peace in Europe. That is over. If the West fails to defend our liberal values, we will become the plaything of autocrats.

International conflicts and their effects are increasingly coming into our consciousness with great force. They are becoming topics of conversation not only on news programs, talk shows, and in surveys, but also at the kitchen table at home. The defense of our security has long ceased to be an abstract task—it is a concrete necessity. This is especially apparent when looking at Ukraine. Russia’s illegal war of aggression has lasted nearly four years. Above all, it is a war of attrition. We see high-tech drones in trench warfare, archaic violence in war crimes in Bucha, and battles to the bitter end in Bakhmut. Putin’s neo-imperialist ambitions have already cost hundreds of thousands of lives. And there is no end in sight. Russia switched to a war economy some time ago.

Its military now receives more spending than all other policy areas combined. Weapons and ammunition are being produced at full speed or, in some cases, refurbished from old stockpiles. Not all of this goes directly to the front, but also to new military units currently being established along the entire NATO eastern flank. Personnel-wise, Putin is preparing for further confrontations: by the end of 2026, Russian armed forces are expected to grow significantly again, to around 1.5 million soldiers. That is twice as many as before the war began on February 24, 2022. According to military analysts, Russia could be capable of launching large-scale attacks on NATO territory within a few years.

Not necessarily as a campaign of conquest, but perhaps as intensified provocation right at the brink of open war, aiming to undermine the Western alliance system, weaken NATO's security guarantees, and expand its own sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. This is not a prediction, but a plausible possibility. We must take seriously the intentions and goals behind this massive rearmament. Putin is not interested in expanding his massive empire by a few square kilometers. He wants a new world order, and he wants to achieve it through force. Analysts view 2029 as a potential "culmination point," but the threat is already real today. Putin has long viewed himself as being engaged in a "(shadow) war" against the West. This is evidenced by the increasing number of hybrid attacks that Europe is exposed to.

Even in Germany, we observe a wide range of systematic attacks in the gray area between peace and war: cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, severed data cables in the Baltic Sea, sabotage planning, drone-assisted espionage, disinformation campaigns on social media, and even foiled attack plans. All these "pinpricks" are intended to shake confidence in our state. They aim to undermine the cohesion of our societies. Germany plays a particular role—as Ukraine's main supporter in Europe and as a hub for the Allies in deploying to NATO's eastern flank. These hybrid attacks strike us—deliberately scalable and capable of being scaled—at the boundary between internal and external security, specifically at the intersection of different responsibilities. It is essential to act in a coordinated fashion at this point of entry, both nationally and internationally.

"RUSSIA'S QUEST FOR POWER REMAINS, FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, THE GREATEST AND MOST IMMEDIATE THREAT TO THE EURO-ATLANTIC AREA."

Russia's quest for power will remain, for the foreseeable future, the greatest and most immediate threat to the Euro-Atlantic area. But it is by no means the only one. Across the globe, other crisis hotspots demand our vigilance. The conflict in the Middle East—or rather, conflicts—continue to concern us and require action. Crises overlap, blend into one another, and reinforce each other. And every conflict has the potential to have global effects. This can be seen, for example, with North Korea, which is supporting Russia in the war against Ukraine

with soldiers and weapons. Resources flow back—not only financial, but military expertise and, above all, weapons components, including those for carrier rockets that can be equipped with nuclear warheads. Thousands of North Korean soldiers are fighting against Ukraine—and dying for Russia.

The losses are immense, but this way North Korean soldiers gain combat experience. Their baptism of fire against Ukraine increases the combat effectiveness of all North Korean armed forces. What is already clear: this destabilization through such interactions is occurring not only in Europe but also in East Asia. These complex interconnections make it clear: we must view all these seemingly separate crises and theaters of war around the world holistically, from a 360-degree perspective. We must recognize and discuss dependencies, interactions, and connections at all levels of action. In military terms: we have to consolidate the strategic situation, draw the necessary conclusions—at the speed required. And right now, that speed is very high.

"WE MUST VIEW ALL THE SEEMINGLY SEPARATE CRISES AND THEATERS OF WAR IN THE WORLD AS A WHOLE."

We are at the threshold of a new world order. In this period of upheaval, the West—and we—bear the responsibility to defend our liberal values with resolve. If we do not engage, we risk becoming the plaything of autocrats. This is not only a moral duty, but a fundamental realpolitik self-interest.

A world in which the rule of law is replaced by the law of the strong is something we cannot and must not accept. And in terms of global challenges, the world is shrinking: crises, and possible solutions, are moving closer together. This challenges us as never before. And it won't get easier. That is why readiness is today not only our own currency, but that of the entire NATO. For more than 30 years, we have lived in peace in Europe. That is over, and it is hard to get used to. But we have no choice. Credible deterrence is our "best-case scenario." At the NATO Summit in The Hague in June 2025, all 32 Allies agreed on how and with what military means they will position themselves in the future. They set out, in binding terms, who will take responsibility in which areas.

After the United States, Germany provides the second-largest so-called capability package. We are on the way to becoming the engine of European defense. This means, for example, that we will establish new combat troop units, broaden our industrial base, and strengthen multinational

cooperation. Ultimately, it also means that in the future we will spend 3.5 percent of GDP on defense and 1.5 percent on military infrastructure. With the help of the special fund, we have already set many things in motion: we have ordered tanks, ships, aircraft, drones. We expect key deliveries this and next year; unfortunately, armaments are not available off the shelf like at the hardware store around the corner. With the constitutional amendment that exempts defense spending above 1 percent of GDP from the debt brake, we have made another major step to cope with the expanded range of orders.

We have put security first. We now no longer have a time-limited special fund, but an uncapped budget. Uncapped, however, does not mean unlimited. More than ever before, we must justify every cent to the parliament. We can do that. And we will do so. We have already prioritized which capabilities the Bundeswehr needs most urgently. These include systems for air defense, as well as ammunition and means for electronic warfare, among others. It is important that not only the Bundeswehr now has planning certainty, but also industry and startups that must first ramp up their capacities. Equally important is looking well beyond 2029 at the future of warfare. That is why we must think and plan in at least two categories: In the short term, until 2029, the priority is readiness. In the long term, far beyond 2029, it is anticipation, flexibility, and keeping pace with disruptive developments.

Because we now have new technological possibilities that are changing the established paths of technology development and military strategy. In the past, the military was the driver of technological development—today, it is the reverse: technological progress generates strategic challenges. Long term, this will also influence the development of our doctrine and lead us to rethink war—even down to the battlefield. The innovation cycle for drones in Ukraine, for example, is about two weeks. We need to be similarly agile in peacetime—even without war dictating it. Threats on the battlefield force armed forces to constant adaptation. Therefore, we must also become more flexible, agile, and consequently faster in procurement. Wherever necessary, we must also break new ground.

We must ask: Where are we not looking today—what do we not yet know, what can we not yet grasp? But also: How do we ensure the Bundeswehr becomes both a driver of technology and can quickly and reliably incorporate new technologies? There are cooperation opportunities, for example, in the digitization and flexibilization of defense systems through software-based control, in Software Defined Defence. The use of artificial intelligence to analyze data or to support military decision-making is another field where armed forces depend on research and development in business and industry. Therefore, there must be close coordination between business and military strategy development.

Clearly, the current threat situation can only be met with a comprehensive societal effort, with united forces—state and private. The armed forces are only as strong as the defense industry that stands behind them. It is not only about the ability to innovate, but also about the willingness to take risks—for a higher good. Soldiers are trained to take risks. They must be able to fight and win. Because they have to win. This does not only apply to soldiers.

NATO currently has around 500,000 men and women in high readiness. But for me it is equally clear: responsibility for our security and freedom cannot rest solely on uniformed shoulders. It is a task for society as a whole. Only together can we defend our country; only together can we deter. We must think and act holistically, even now in peacetime. We must become more closely and strongly interlinked. That lays the foundation for resilience. A combat-ready Bundeswehr is only one side of the coin. On the other side, we need equally resilient civil structures—in other words: a society capable of defense.

"THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR SECURITY AND FREEDOM CANNOT REST SOLELY ON UNIFORMED SHOULDERS. IT IS A TASK FOR SOCIETY AS A WHOLE."

Both together create the prerequisites for credible deterrence. We soldiers may be the ones who win battles—but modern wars must be confronted by and with a society. The economy plays a major part. The better and faster we can equip our armed forces, the better we will be able to deter. And we must deter. The more credible our deterrence, the greater our chances of protecting the freedom so dear to us. The better our prospects of living in the future as we do now—and of preventing war in Europe. We will only succeed with this effort together—carried by the certainty that a life in freedom and security is worth it.

26

Interview / Düzen Tekkal



“Democracy is fighting for survival”

Our world order is facing profound upheavals. Democracy, peace, and the rule of law are in peril in many places, warns journalist and human rights activist Düzen Tekkal. In this interview, she speaks about growing identity conflicts and the global rise of extremism and populism. Tekkal calls for an active defense of democracy, stresses the importance of Europe’s strategic autonomy, and criticizes the role of various actors in the Middle East conflict.

ATLANTIK-BRÜCKE **Ms. Tekkal, looking at current global conflicts, are we witnessing a world order in transition?**

DÜZEN TEKKAL Clearly, we are experiencing a true Zeitenwende, if I may use that word again. Francis Fukuyama’s thesis that liberal democracies would prevail everywhere at the “end of history” has not come true—quite the opposite. The Western era is over. We are seeing a shift from a bloc-based system to one of single nations increasingly positioning themselves individually. The international architecture as we knew it no longer exists. States act today more “à la carte,” and global politics is more complex than ever. The central task now is to create order—in our thinking, feeling, and action—especially for liberal Western democracies.

Does a “new world order” bring more opportunities for peace—or new risks for conflict?

We see profound identity crises everywhere. We are once again in the midst of a “clash of civilizations” and identity conflicts. What Samuel P. Huntington once described as an open confrontation of cultures has become

our reality. Conflicts arise when warlords deliberately instrumentalize identity, ethnicity, and religion. The credibility problem of the West is obvious—too often, values were preached while only self-interests were pursued. This can be seen in conflicts around Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza. Extremists are more active worldwide than ever before. Peace is not a given; it must be actively defended, something we in Europe have ignored for too long.

Much is at stake—our democracy and the rule of law are under threat. Democracy faces unprecedented hostility and fragmentation. Values such as self-criticism and openness to discourse are fading. Social polarization is increasing further through phenomena like "cancel culture."

Where do you see that democracy is fighting for survival?

Most clearly in the United States, where the rule of law is being eroded piece by piece. Donald Trump governs more and more like someone wielding emergency powers—deploying the National Guard in major cities and using the ICE immigration agency aggressively, which has even led to U.S. citizens being deported. His policies divide the nation and poison the social climate. Extremist political views have become socially acceptable, fueling one another—even through political assassinations, which are disturbingly being normalized in public discourse. For some political observers, the question is no longer whether the United States is on the path toward fascism—it already is. We in Europe must also remain vigilant and resist disinformation campaigns, the hollowing out of democratic institutions, and politically motivated violence.

Right-wing populist parties are gaining traction globally. Should we be seriously concerned about democracy, freedom, and human rights?

Right-wing populists pose a major danger—the AfD (the far-right party Alternative for Germany) shows how extreme positions conquer parliamentary space. But extremism is not confined to the right; left-wing extremism, Islamism, and antisemitism are equally serious threats. My impression is that democrats give up too early. It is alarming to see how many from the political center now believe they can benefit by adopting the AfD's policies and rhetoric. Yet political barometers show they are not rewarded for tearing down the so-called "firewall." There is every reason to fear that in next year's local and regional elections, voters will choose the "original" instead.

The reasons for the shift to the right also lie within the political establishment: many people truly feel left behind, as reflected in the success of radical parties like the AfD and the BSW (the left-wing populist party Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht) —and not only here; we see the same in America. We must reclaim the spaces of debate and stand up more strongly for our values. Right now, I observe a dangerous "spiral of silence." People are no longer willing to take risks, as those who clearly voice their anti-fascist stance are immediately attacked. This is especially visible on platforms like TikTok, where the AfD and Islamist groups dominate discourse and deliberately spread their content. Algorithms fuel polarization and lead to dangerous disinformation in parts of society.

Is social media amplifying these developments?

Social media acts like a magnifying glass for society. Algorithmic dynamics often escape any meaningful control. Tech companies fail to take sufficient responsibility, with the result that hate and threats often go unpunished. In my view, we are facing a crisis of democracy.

How can we save our democracy?

It's now about breathing life back into this democracy—online and offline. That means building a democratic ecosystem. We need civil society actors, but also businesses and organizations like Atlantik-Brücke, to engage in discourse with motivation and courage. Politics has not yet realized that it must give people a sense of what Germany stands for. We must not leave the narratives about Germany to the wrong people.

What role do the United States play in the new world order?

The U.S. is deeply divided and has partly turned away from its international leadership role. Transatlantic relations are more strained than they have been in a long time. Polarization and populist tendencies—especially under Donald Trump—are attacking the democratic core values head-on. Europe is increasingly being seen as an adversary in U.S. politics.

In Europe, we often hear of "strategic autonomy." Is that a realistic option, or does the continent remain dependent on the U.S.?

Europe is more important than ever for those who defend freedom and democracy. Strategic autonomy is therefore indispensable, and the "European Dream" must be actively advanced. Europe's ability to defend itself and articulate its position is crucial to our future—this must finally sink in, even for peace-accustomed Europeans. We must convincingly convey that freedom and peace give meaning and life—and are therefore worth defending.

Many European countries are again introducing border controls. Are these signs of the EU's disintegration?

These are indeed worrying signals. However, their causes often lie within rather than outside. The lack of integration and the failure to convey democratic values are central problems.

Turning to the Middle East: What long-term consequences will Israel's military actions have for the region?

The Middle East clearly shows that conflicts are no longer regional but have become globalized. Decisions made there have far-reaching consequences because the issue is like social dynamite. We see a dramatic surge in antisemitism worldwide—but also growing dehumanization and lack of solidarity with Palestinians. We must not leave discourse to extremists who exploit the issue for agitation. Many of them are not genuinely concerned about Gaza—otherwise, they would also highlight Hamas's role or support Palestinian voices calling for a

peaceful solution. On the other hand, Prime Minister Netanyahu's government has been issued what amounts to a blank check. We must do everything possible to ensure a livable future for Palestinians in Israel-Palestine.

You have just returned from Syria. The new transitional government under President Ahmad Al-Sharaa is trying to consolidate control after Assad's fall but faces numerous militias, religious groups, and international actors. Where do you see chances for a sustainable solution?

When I was recently in Syria, I sensed both a spirit of new beginnings and of fear. The Americans' "easy way out" is, at best, naïve. One cannot ignore or forget Al-Sharaa's background—and his example shows how one can be both Islamist, jihadist, and statesman. We will pay a bitter price if we don't view Syria realistically and continue to look away while minorities are threatened. It should be in everyone's interest that the Syria of the future represents all people—Druze, Christians, Kurds, Alawites, and Yazidis alike. The West's main mistake is choosing the wrong interlocutors. The massacres committed in Syria, now confirmed by the UN, are driving migration. Where are minorities supposed to go if they no longer feel safe there?

Iran remains a key factor in the region. How will power relations between Iran, the Gulf States, and the West develop in the coming years?

That is the key question. Iran remains a central actor with an aggressive policy, particularly toward Israel. The human rights situation in Iran remains dire, as ongoing protests by the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement and strikes over supply crises show. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps should finally be placed on the EU terror list, as many human rights organizations have demanded. Regarding the nuclear program: pretending that one can deal realistically with the Islamist regime is, in my view, naïve. It remains to be seen how the Gulf States will position themselves in the face of the Gaza war. Hamas and the Islamic Republic have succeeded in one respect: talks about the Abraham Accords have stalled, and normalization efforts among the Arab population have likely lost support—as the Israeli government takes steps undermining a two-state solution.

What role does Turkey play in the new world order?

Turkey acts strategically and exploits its position. President Erdoğan has become a symbolic figure for parts of the Islamic world. But opportunistic interests also play a role: Turkey is considered an ally in stopping migration flows. At the same time, a NATO partner is carrying out heavy military strikes in Kurdish regions, especially in Northeast Syria—bombing villages and destroying civilian infrastructure. Why is this reality barely discussed in political debates, and why does hardly anyone call for an end to arms deliveries to Turkey?

Many people fear Russia. Do you think this fear is justified?

Of course. It should now be clear to everyone: Ukraine is Europe's defense line. Ukraine is not only defending itself but all of us. Therefore, it is

unbearable that some are now turning perpetrators into victims. The policy of "change through trade" with Russia has failed. The fact that parties like the AfD and BSW win support despite echoing Putin's propaganda is a clear sign of growing polarization and the poisoning of our society.

And what about China?

China's influence is expanding immensely—especially in technology and, more subtly, in political matters. Control over information and algorithms, as seen with TikTok, shows how far China now shapes the global agenda.

You often say that civil courage must be thought of globally. What does that mean now, as the world order shifts and many feel powerless?

We in Europe cannot afford this sense of helplessness or world-weariness. I regularly meet people in war zones—in Iraq, Kurdistan, or Syria—who have far more to lose yet risk everything. We should take inspiration from that. We live in a country that guarantees freedom of expression—so why do we so rarely take a stand, even though we could? Civil courage is more important today than ever.

What gives you hope?

Despite all the challenges, humanity keeps rising again—even in the most difficult regions of the world. That is the source of courage and hope for the future.

What do you wish from the German government?

Courage, realism, and an uncompromising commitment to stand up against racism, religious extremism, and all forms of hostility toward humanity. Thank you very much for the conversation, Ms. Tekkal.

Düzen Tekkal is a German journalist and human rights activist. Besides her work as a filmmaker, she is involved in several social projects and serves as chair of the nonprofit humanitarian organization HÁWAR.help.

Interview by **Beate Wild**,
Director of Communications at Atlantik-Brücke.

PUBLICATIONS

34

Essay / Florian Hahn

ATLANTIK-BRÜCKE



„Wir müssen die nächste Generation von Transatlantikern erreichen“

The current developments in transatlantic relations contain an important lesson for German foreign policy. In a time of global upheavals and geopolitical uncertainties, the federal government is determined to strengthen the alliance with the United States, while simultaneously considering new partnerships—for example with countries in Latin America. Our goal must be to reach the next generation of transatlanticists—for lasting security, vibrant freedom, and sustainable prosperity.

The United States remains our most important ally and partner outside Europe. This is especially true with regard to global challenges and numerous conflicts, foremost among them the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East, and in particular for safeguarding our security, our freedom, and our prosperity. Despite all tensions and contradictions, the transatlantic relationship is a pillar of the federal government’s foreign policy, and the transatlantic alliance is the guarantor of our security. This remains true regardless of sometimes critical perceptions in the public sphere – for example, following the speech by US Vice President J. D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference 2025, concerning US trade policy and discussions about the future orientation of the European security architecture.

Through intensive diplomatic visits, since taking office, the federal government has underpinned this with not just words but deeds, including toward the USA. This success is evident in the good contacts between the Federal Chancellor and Foreign Minister with their US counterparts. Together with the US government and allies in NATO, we worked towards the Hague summit and led it to success as an alliance of 32 allies, with a clear commitment to continued collective defense and Article 5, as well as agreement on significantly increased investments in our deterrence and defense, which are crucial for Euro-Atlantic security—our security as the Federal Republic of Germany—given the long-term threat posed by Russia.

Security

The Russian airspace violations in NATO territory this September—whether by drones over Poland and Romania or fighter jets over Estonia—show us how tense the current situation is. In this critical situation, the importance of the transatlantic alliance—the most important and successful defense alliance ever—cannot be overstated. This is particularly true for Germany: about 37,000 American soldiers are stationed here, with key military facilities and infrastructure of the US armed forces located here. It is all the more important that we—together with our allies and European partners—do more for our own security and take responsibility.

The federal government has taken a decisive step with the reform of the debt brake to invest in our own defense capabilities. Like our NATO allies, by 2035 we will spend 5 percent of GDP—3.5 percent for defense expenditures and 1.5 percent for security- and defense-related tasks. At the European level, we have established an instrument that supports European member states in investing in their defense industry and thus their defense capabilities. Both are successes of determined German diplomacy that create new cooperation opportunities—including with the USA. This determination of the federal government to invest more in its own and European security and to strengthen the European pillar in NATO is also positively recognized by the US government.

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, its military build-up, and revisionist goals beyond Ukraine represent the greatest threat to our security. Despite mediation efforts by the US president, Putin shows no serious willingness to negotiate. A ceasefire or an end to the war is not in sight. It is clear to us: we cannot do without the USA. Therefore, a determined and sustainable engagement by the USA—whether through supporting Ukraine with US weapons systems and sharing intelligence, or through coordinating sanctions and other pressure measures within the G7—is an even more important signal to Russia. At the same time, we Europeans must, within our means, do more to support Ukraine. Since 2022, Germany has already provided or committed bilateral military support amounting to 40 billion euros for the coming years. By supporting the financing of US arms deliveries through a newly established NATO mechanism of up to 500 million euros and the Chancellor's proposals for the legally secure use of immobilized Russian assets to support Ukraine, we are going a step further. We call on our European EU partners and NATO allies to follow our example.

Freedom

The USA, through their landmark decisions after World War II and their support for German reunification, remain a guarantee of security, freedom, and prosperity in Germany and Europe. Without the courageous decisions of the then US government, there would neither be a reunified, democratic, and economically strong Germany nor a free Europe. For this, we remain very grateful to the USA.

"THE VALUES THAT MAKE EUROPE STRONG ARE THE CORNERSTONES OF OUR FREEDOM."

However, this gratitude does not mean that we would adopt every critical statement about freedom of expression and democracy in Europe, not even those from some representatives of the current administration. On the contrary: the values that make Europe strong and the liberal-democratic basic order of Germany are the cornerstones of our freedom. Freedom of expression and democracy are highly valued in Germany and Europe and are preserved and defended through our rule of law.

Prosperity

The numbers are clear: The USA are the most important destination for German exports outside the EU. The USA are the largest non-European investor in Germany. Germany, in turn, is the third-largest investor in the USA. German subsidiaries currently provide about 870,000 jobs in the USA, US subsidiaries in Germany about 640,000, underpinning the importance of the transatlantic economic area. Such close economic interconnections have developed over decades and cannot be substituted in the short term. It is also not in mutual interest to dissolve these closely intertwined supply chains—partly in critical sectors—and thus weaken the resilience of the transatlantic market in the face of major geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges.

Looking ahead, transatlantic cooperation holds immense potential: together, Europe and the USA account for 43 percent of global GDP and nearly 30 percent of global trade in goods and services. European research institutions, universities, and companies are innovation engines for the critical technologies of tomorrow. To fully exploit this potential, it will be important to strengthen our competitiveness and innovative strength in Europe as well—and thus to meet the USA on equal footing.

From the outset, the federal government has supported the removal of mutual barriers. The trade agreement achieved between the USA and the EU

should only be an intermediate step, as its asymmetry poses great challenges to our companies and increases the risk of fragmentation of free trade. However, it creates short-term security and predictability for German and European companies and has prevented an escalation of the trade conflict with potentially serious consequences for the European economy. Therefore, the federal government supports the European Commission in negotiations with the USA along our economic policy interests. At the same time, the federal government advocates European unity among member states and promotes further diversification of EU trade relations.

New lessons, new fields of action

Looking at developments in all three fields—security, freedom, prosperity—since the start of the US government and the federal government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz, it becomes clear: current developments in transatlantic relations also contain an important lesson for German foreign policy. Germany must "relearn" self-confident, interest-oriented targeted cooperation with states in the sense of the triad of security, freedom, and prosperity. This applies especially or even particularly when these states do not or no longer fully share our values.

What does that mean? In the case of the USA as a central partner and ally, opportunities and challenges present themselves equally. It is clear that we must preserve the long-grown shared values and interests and build them up where consensus is possible. At the same time, in the transatlantic relationship, alongside core topics of security and economy, we must also define new fields of action along our interests to not only secure this cooperation but also to bring it into a new era.

New target groups

Relations with the USA are changing—especially with regard to our populations: historically, fewer and fewer people in the USA and Germany are socialized transatlantically. To keep relations stable in the USA, it must also be about strengthening them in the middle of our respective societies. Therefore, we need to take care to reach the next generation of Transatlanticists. We want Germany to be positively perceived in all its dimensions in the USA. This means reaching as many diverse population groups as possible. In recent years, the federal government and its predecessors have invested a lot: we have intensified exchanges of our cultural mediators, alumni, and honorary consuls in the USA, strengthened cooperation with subnational partners such as state parliaments, mayors, and other officials in the states, and brought new target groups to Germany through customized programs.

We do not want to rest on achievements and will intensify our efforts. This includes, among others, sports diplomacy at upcoming major events like the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. It includes the Goethe-Institut opening new locations away from the coasts in Houston and St. Louis. It also includes winning many people in the USA who have contact points with Germany—for example alumni of exchange and scholarship programs

or veterans who served in Germany—as ambassadors for Germany. Many of them are willing to actively commit to the German-American partnership.

Future technologies

Whether artificial intelligence, quantum computing, or space travel: when it comes to the critical technologies of the future, European researchers and companies are always involved. Even if we cannot always keep up with the entrepreneurial speed in the USA and the financing opportunities there, cooperation in sensitive technology areas is only possible among like-minded states for reasons of technical and national sovereignty. This is why there is great potential for deepened cooperation between Germany/Europe and the USA. We should focus on space travel; German space start-ups are already important suppliers for US giants SpaceX and Blue Origin, and ESA is already an important partner for NASA. We need to build on and offer proposals here since cooperation with the USA can also be a driver for our own economy and innovation strength. For us, this also means continuing to invest in our own innovative capacity and research security to be an attractive and trustworthy partner.

"WE MUST CONTINUE TO INVEST IN OUR OWN INNOVATION CAPABILITIES AND RESEARCH SECURITY."

New partnerships

Whether in the Indo-Pacific or Latin America: the federal government has made it its task to establish new partnerships worldwide and deepen existing ones. This includes our commitment to the timely conclusion of EU free trade agreements with MERCOSUR and Indonesia, support for EU negotiations for free trade agreements with India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, as well as intensifying our relations with Canada. This strengthens the resilience of the European economy, diversifies risks, and creates new starting points for cooperation with the USA and transatlantic relations.

This also applies particularly to Latin America: The US government aims to focus more on Latin America in foreign policy. This involves—especially in competition with China—the question of who will set narratives and exert influence in South America in the future. Germany has a close network on the continent and is seen as a credible partner in many countries. That is why we

should coordinate our commitment with the USA and act jointly wherever possible. Especially in connectivity, we can offer alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative with the EU's Global Gateway and deepen economic ties. We can also contribute importantly in crisis contexts. For example, Germany pledged another five million euros at the UN General Assembly to support international efforts to restore peace and security in Haiti. This sent a signal of our engagement for the region that was closely observed in Latin America and the USA.

Outlook

Our relations with the USA have rarely been straightforward since the end of World War II but have always been of central importance to the Federal Republic of Germany. Even more than a year after Donald Trump's election as the 47th US president, they will continue to intensively occupy German and European politics. It is therefore all the more important to continue investing beyond everyday business and beyond the major lines of our time in the future of these relations, in the USA and beyond.

PUBLICATIONS

42

Essay / Claudia Plattner
& Florian Seiller

ATLANTIK-BRÜCKE


BSI

“Faster to digital sovereignty”

The threat situation in cyberspace remains tense and continues to grow in quality and quantity in the context of geopolitical power shifts and hybrid attacks. Cyber aggression has massive impacts on the state, economy, science, and society, thus affecting our prosperity as well as our security. At the same time, new technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) are emerging, offering many opportunities but also presenting new challenges—especially in cybersecurity.

In handling technologies and digital products, a dual strategy is needed to prepare for the future: We must strengthen the European market and domestic digital industry while adapting or embedding non-European products as necessary—aiming to use them securely and autonomously. This is only possible through close cooperation among the state, economy, science, and society.

Cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum technologies, and mobile standards 5G/6G are key technologies and essential drivers of digitalization. They are transforming our world at tremendous speed, enabling unprecedented innovation for state, economy, science, and society, thus forming the basis of our prosperity and competitiveness. They are indispensable to our economy and increasingly permeate everyday life, from smartphones, tablets, wearables, electric vehicles, smart homes, social media presence, to cloud storage of personal data. Yet we are only at the beginning of profound developments: smart factories, smart cities, eGovernment, automated and connected mobility, eHealth, and New Space may soon become reality. The 2030s might usher in the next megatrend: quantum technologies promising leaps in computing power, communication, sensing, and simulation. Moreover, the number of connected devices is expected to surge to over 39 billion globally by 2033—more than four devices per person.

The cyber threat landscape

To successfully shape digitalization, massive effort and acceleration are required in state modernization, research, market transfer, legislation, and standards, especially if we want to compete in the digital top league and lead in future technologies. Current geopolitical developments confronting the West sharpen our awareness of the inseparability of digitalization and security and the necessity of addressing both jointly as two sides of the same coin.

Particularly in cyberspace, what we call cyber aggression is felt profoundly. It is becoming a central battlefield for hybrid attacks (cyber conflict), a hotspot for criminals (cybercrime), and a sphere of technological dependencies (cyber dominance). Digital espionage, sabotage, disinformation, and propaganda have massively intensified over years, executable from almost anywhere in protected environments far from targets. Attribution is difficult as actors easily mask identities online. The damage caused—both virtual and physical—can be significant. For instance, cyberattacks on a European airport service provider in September 2025 severely disrupted air traffic. Or recall wind turbine disruption due to a satellite network attack in the context of the Ukraine war (2022). Persistent ransomware attacks targeting municipalities or their IT service providers disrupt or paralyze administration. Not only critical infrastructures but also democratic institutions—parliaments, parties, politicians, ministries, authorities, foundations, think tanks, and NGOs—face continuous digital fire aimed at shaking trust in state protection and democracy. A particularly insidious tactic is leaking stolen or manipulated data to discredit victims. Elections, a democracy's core element, have also been targeted by foreign actors—with Germany's vigilance keeping substantial success at bay. Many such attacks originate from state or state-affiliated actors such as intelligence services or APT groups with significant financial, technological, and personnel resources.

Cybercriminals operate sprawling, specialized ecosystems making substantial profits, especially via ransomware. Daily, around 300,000 malware variants appear. Boundaries between cyber conflict and cybercrime are increasingly blurred. The damages from cyberattacks to the German economy are

"DIGITALIZATION AND SECURITY ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED. IT IS ESSENTIAL TO THINK OF BOTH TOGETHER."

immense: estimates for 2025 are about €202.4 billion, nearly €23 billion more than last year. For comparison, the 2025 federal budget is around €502.5 billion. IT outages from technical problems can also cause massive losses, such as the billions lost in 2024 due to a faulty update of Crowdstrike Falcon security software.

Analogously, Germany experiences continuous espionage and sabotage on land, water, and air, such as drone overflights, arson attacks, airspace provocations, or shadow fleets. Chancellor Friedrich Merz summarized this starkly: "We are not at war, but we are no longer living in peace" (Schwarz Ecosystem Summit, 26.09.2025).

Threat trends in cyberspace exemplified by artificial intelligence

Technological advances significantly shape security and defense policies. Dual-use technology AI is especially powerful, transforming social media, work, research, entertainment, and medicine. However, new technologies can also be misused. Foreign powers, criminals, and politically motivated hackers use innovative technologies to bypass IT defenses and increase digital offensive power. Already, attackers use AI-based methods on IT systems and infrastructure. AI-assisted attack tools speed vulnerability detection and exploitation, evade defenses, deploy malware via tailored social engineering (e.g., almost perfectly personalized phishing emails), or create malicious code—all without deep technical know-how. The darknet offers wide "shopping" options payable in cryptocurrency. AI might even support ransomware payments in cryptocurrency. The German Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) strongly advises against ransom payment. AI also amplifies Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attacks which temporarily disable web servers via overload. Particularly worrying is generative AI enabling automated attacks.

AI is heavily used for creating deepfakes and spreading disinformation, especially around elections, political campaigns, or to damage reputations. Expert knowledge is not always necessary—faces, voices, texts, and photos can be convincingly faked and misused criminally or politically. Experts increasingly struggle to distinguish real from fake due to rapid AI progress. Transparency is key, involving detection and digital "watermarks" to reliably verify content and provenance and identify AI-generated material. Authenticity confirmation from

senders is needed—for example, a chancellor's video should bear the federal chancellor's office's signature, while the Vatican would unlikely sign a photo of the pope in a Gucci coat.

Manipulation risk also comes from tampering AI systems by inputting distorted data to extract sensitive information or manipulate IT systems. In sum: AI models, especially large language models (LLMs), make future attacks faster, cheaper, and accessible to less technical hackers. AI's military significance is evident in the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Autonomous AI hacking tools that independently compromise IT infrastructures do not yet exist, but LLM-based agents automating parts of attacks are deployed by foreign actors. The future will see attacks involving AI and against AI, cloud infrastructures, autonomous systems, or cryptography (e.g., quantum computing). We face a permanent and accelerating race between attackers and defenders.

The good news: new technologies do not only pose uncertainties but also many new opportunities—also for IT security. AI can help detect cyber threats and vulnerabilities faster (prevention), detect anomalies in data traffic (detection), intelligently analyze huge data sets, and automate defensive measures (response).

At the National IT Situation Centre, the operational cyber defense core at BSI, AI is already in use. However, only one in ten companies currently uses AI for cyber defense, so there is significant room for growth. Saarbrücken, a real AI hotspot, houses BSI's AI expertise, intensively addressing AI and security questions, including digital consumer protection. In summer 2025, BSI published a checklist for AI systems in finance to systematically assess security, transparency, traceability, and fairness.

Technological dependencies exemplified by AI

Europeans' vulnerabilities stem not only from direct attacks with new technologies but also from longstanding technological dependencies—digital products, quantum computing, 5G components, hardware, clouds, semiconductors. This is noticeable in administration, economy, and research. Surveys show that dependencies on the USA and China are perceived as largest in Germany. International crises and geopolitical tensions—sometimes fought with tariff and trade policy instruments, causing global trade conflicts—directly impact supply chains and can lead to influence via digital product manufacturers accessing data and services. Examples include solar inverter or router manufacturers from states where official bodies exert extensive control and mandatory cooperation. Sabotage risks, such as in conflict scenarios, are also present. Such influence possibilities (cyber dominance) risk supply security, economy, and general security.

"THE USA AND CHINA HAVE SIGNIFICANT MARKET POWER."

In AI, besides manufacturer access, market concentration causes technological dependency. The USA and China dominate, controlling availability of advanced generative AI models and necessary cloud infrastructures. Powerful AI models are usually licensed restrictively or cloud-hosted. Few large US and Chinese firms dominate training and hosting. Hardware is often overlooked: powerful AI systems demand specific, high-performance chips (GPUs, dedicated AI chips) developed and produced by few global companies in specific regions. This creates tangible supply risks and uncertainties. Additionally, dependency on quality training data with unverifiable validity exists.

Measures to strengthen digital sovereignty

As Germany's cybersecurity authority, BSI believes states must ensure digital key technologies are available and securely usable to successfully and safely advance digitalization, mitigate risks, and reduce dependencies—especially amid hybrid threats and geopolitical rivalries. Our view: a dual strategy is needed:

FIRST, strengthen the European market and domestic digital industry and accelerate digital sovereignty. Large foreign Big Tech companies still have significant lead in some areas; a full and sudden switch to national and European digital solutions is currently impossible. Since alternatives to foreign suppliers in AI are currently limited, European AI promotion must be intensified. Cybersecurity must be considered from the start (security by design).

Fortunately, numerous promising national and European approaches, initiatives, and products now exist in cloud and AI. Germany and Europe must catch up. We must invest more in German and European programs and better foster market readiness of domestic developers and manufacturers to produce internationally competitive products. Often, the hurdle is not fundamental research but market entry. This applies to cybersecurity products as well. Building a cyber market concretely benefits our cybersecurity and is a pillar of BSI's strategy toward a cyber nation.

"WE MUST INVEST MORE STRONGLY IN GERMAN AND EUROPEAN PROGRAMS."

SECOND, adapt or embed international products technically as needed for secure and autonomous use and reliable prevention of undesired data leaks. European norms, standards, and security requirements must guide manufacturers and providers. Core is implementing technical control layers in products and services to better secure technologies and reduce dependencies. Yet extensive

research and development effort is required. Securing products also requires close collaboration with manufacturers and open source communities nationally, across Europe, and internationally—practiced by BSI already.

The more trustworthy products available, the more sovereign decisions and secure digitalization become. It is about assessing and mastering technologies. Without this ability, we cannot master digitalization or cybersecurity. Assessing security properties and deriving requirements for products and services is a core BSI task. Close exchange with international partners, especially transatlantic, is indispensable.

This is why we also value dialogue at Atlantik-Brücke: it provides a forum for exchange among state, economic, and societal representatives on both sides of the Atlantic, strengthens mutual trust, and brings the transatlantic value community to life amid massive security threats. We look forward to continued exchange and jointly shaping cybersecurity in the future!

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