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Friedrich Merz's foreign policy – opening protocol

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In the first weeks of his term, Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU) undertook eight foreign trips. He also hosted the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, and the Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, in Berlin, among other politicians. This international engagement is intended to enable Germany to rejoin the group of states shaping the security of the European continent, assume a leadership role within the EU, and improve relations with the Donald Trump administration. For this reason, the Chancellor is currently focused on building strong relations with European partners, ensuring continued support for Ukraine and Germany's influence on the peace process, as well as strengthening the alliance with the United States.

The consolidation of foreign and security policy competences within the Chancellery and under the control of the CDU/CSU is intended to help Merz fulfil his plans. The German public expects the government to be engaged in foreign policy activity; these efforts could therefore strengthen Merz's domestic position and improve the government's approval ratings.

Ambitions versus reality

The destinations chosen for the Chancellor's first trips abroad reflect the foreign policy priorities of the new leadership, as was the case with his predecessors. His first aim is to reinvigorate dialogue with neighbouring and partner states in Europe – immediately after being sworn in, he visited Paris and Warsaw. Both visits served as opening protocols to outline shared and contentious issues, but did not result in any breakthroughs. In France, the main topic was security, including the reactivation of the Franco-German Security Council and the announcement of talks on the potential extension of France's nuclear umbrella to Europe.

A key point of contention remains France's opposition to the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement, which Berlin supports. During the visit to Warsaw, both sides expressed a willingness to deepen bilateral relations and cooperation within the Weimar Triangle. The discussions focused primarily on security, the development of transport infrastructure, and migration policy. On the latter, Poland clearly rejected Germany's planned tightening of border controls.

Secondly, Merz aims for Germany to assume a leading role in the peace process to end the war in Ukraine and in shaping European security. His visit to Kyiv, undertaken alongside the leaders of France, Poland, and the United Kingdom, served this purpose, as did the announcement of a new package of sanctions against Russia should the Kremlin reject a 30-day ceasefire. However, this package has yet to be implemented owing to the desire to coordinate additional measures with the United States – a process that has so far yielded

no tangible results. The 17th package of EU sanctions against Russia, which is already in force, had been prepared before the visit of the above-mentioned heads of government to Kyiv. As regards security matters, Merz engages in formats beyond the traditional alliance with Paris. This includes the E5 group and participation in meetings with the Nordic prime ministers (N5).

Seeking to move away from the policy of his predecessor, who focused on establishing 'red lines' in German support for Ukraine, Merz has adopted a stance of 'strategic ambiguity'. Olaf Scholz's government, wary of escalation, concentrated mainly on supplying Ukraine with air defence systems while limiting the provision of offensive weapons. It also regularly published information about the equipment sent. By contrast, the new Chancellor has opted to classify such data and has declared that there would be no restrictions on the range of weapons used by Ukraine. In practice, however, Merz's policy differs little from that of the previous government, aside from a shift in rhetoric. Taurus missiles, with a range of 500 km, still will not be delivered to the front line.

During President Zelensky's visit to Berlin, a letter of intent was signed pledging support for Ukraine in producing its own long-range weapons systems. Additionally, Germany announced a further delivery of ammunition, IRIS-T air defence systems and associated missiles worth €2.2 billion – an initiative originally launched by the previous government. The Chancellor also announced a new arms package worth €5 billion, which had already been approved by the Bundestag during the last legislative term. Like his predecessor Scholz, he avoids making commitments regarding the seizure of €300 billion in frozen Russian assets held in European banks.

Thirdly, Merz aims to establish the best possible personal relationship with President Trump. Despite his public commitment to strengthening European sovereignty and existing tensions with the current US administration – stemming in part from its support for the AfD – the United States remains Germany's key non-European ally. It is in Berlin's interest to maintain the US military presence in Europe. For this reason, Merz will seek to convince President Trump that German policy has changed in many of the areas he previously criticised. Defence spending will increase, and Germany will deepen its involvement in the defence of NATO's eastern flank. To underscore this commitment, the Chancellor participated in the ceremonial muster of the 45th German Panzer Brigade in Lithuania, which is expected to reach full operational readiness by the end of 2027.

Foreign policy in the Chancellor's hands

Merz seeks to maintain maximum control over foreign and security policy, as evidenced by the Christian Democrats assuming leadership of most bodies responsible for this area. Particularly telling is the appointment of Johann Wadephul as foreign minister, a role that had traditionally been allocated to a coalition partner. The new Chancellor aimed to avoid a repeat of his predecessor's tenure, during which Annalena Baerbock (Greens), then head of the Foreign Ministry, frequently expressed views that diverged from those of the Chancellery – particularly on military aid to Ukraine and policy towards China. A challenge in managing European affairs remains the unresolved issue of the so-called German vote. According to this rule, if the governing coalition fails to reach consensus on a matter under consideration in the EU Council, Germany abstains from voting. This procedural ambiguity continues to hamper cohesive decision-making at the EU level.

The new Chancellor also plans to establish a National Security Council (NSC) – a body tasked with coordinating and planning the country's security policy. Jacob Schrot, one of Merz's closest aides and head of his office, will be responsible for setting it up within the Chancellery. Placing the NSC under the Chancellor's authority will allow Merz to retain control over security policy, especially with the Social Democrat Boris Pistorius remaining as Defence Minister. The Christian Democrats will also chair the parliamentary committees on foreign affairs and defence.

Foreign and security policy as instruments of domestic politics

For Merz, active diplomacy is a means of boosting his government's popularity. In May, 51% of Germans rated his performance positively, while 32% viewed it negatively and 17% had no opinion. During the Bundestag election campaign, the CDU's then-candidate positioned himself as a politician capable of addressing international challenges and restoring the credibility lost under the SPD-Green-FDP coalition (see '*Przejąć inicjatywę. Wizja polityki bezpieczeństwa Friedricha Merza*'). As a result, the CDU/CSU was regarded by the highest share of respondents – approximately 30% – as the most competent political force in matters of foreign and security policy.

The threat posed by Russia and uncertainty over the duration of the US military commitment to Europe have become Merz's main arguments for amending Germany's constitution. The proposed change would allow defence-related expenditure exceeding 1% of GDP to be exempted from the so-called debt brake (see '*Agency on credit: Germany releases the debt brake*'). Merz had previously avoided making definitive statements on such reform, suggesting instead that the required funds could be sourced through cuts to social welfare and more efficient budget management. This tactic brought only partial success. According to a Politbarometer survey conducted at the end of March, 64% of Germans support loosening the debt brake specifically for defence spending. However, 73% also felt misled by the Christian Democrats' abrupt policy reversal. CDU/CSU politicians cited the deteriorating international situation as a key reason to swiftly form a government, hoping this would quell criticism of the coalition negotiation outcomes. Merz supports a proposal for NATO countries to allocate 3.5% of GDP to defence and 1.5% to related investments. It remains unclear, however, whether the SPD will endorse this demand or whether the government will ultimately implement it.

Foreign policy instruments will also be used to curb illegal migration to Germany. The Christian Democrats assume that cooperation with neighbouring countries and increasing the number of deportations – by pressuring countries of origin to take back their citizens – will improve the situation in this area (see '*Germany: a significant drop in the number of asylum applications*').

While Merz's actions may help restore Germany's image as a key EU actor, the country's international credibility will ultimately depend on the effective strengthening of its armed forces, as well as initiatives that enhance NATO and EU capabilities in defence, resilience, and innovation. It is likely that Merz will continue to invoke the need for controversial reforms as essential to safeguarding national security. However, for German voters, the more decisive measure of the CDU/CSU-SPD government's effectiveness will be its domestic achievements – particularly efforts to combat illegal immigration and improve economic competitiveness.