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Between Alliance and Autonomy: Europe's Mini-Lateral Turn and the Strategic Reordering of the EU

By

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10 June 2025

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Executive Summary

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- ✦ Europe is navigating a world, marked by fragmented power, weakened alliances, and growing strategic uncertainty, intensified by Trump's 2024 re-election.
- ✦ Internal EU divisions are deepening, with Eastern states pushing for deterrence against Russia, while Western capitals adopt more cautious or regionally-focused strategies.
- ✦ The revival of the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France, Poland) marks the return of a core strategic grouping, aimed at strengthening EU defense and security governance.
- ✦ The launch of Weimar+ in 2025—including Italy, Spain, the UK, and the European Commission—suggests a growing effort to broaden strategic coordination while retaining flexibility.
- ✦ Germany's pivot away from fiscal orthodoxy, led by a €1 trillion defense stimulus, reflects a major shift in EU economic governance driven by security imperatives.
- ✦ France and Poland are aligning with Germany in advocating fiscal leniency for defense, though domestic pressures and deficits remain key obstacles to broader consensus.
- ✦ The EU Commission's activation of the "escape clause" enables member states to increase defense spending without breaching the Stability and Growth Pact—signaling a shift in budgetary norms.
- ✦ Informal diplomacy is on the rise, with mini-lateral formats like the "coalition of the willing" visiting Kyiv to fill the void left by U.S. disengagement and project European resolve.
- ✦ Despite high-level signaling, military support remains fragmented, with stalled peacekeeping plans and uneven defense capabilities across member states.
- ✦ Mini-lateralism may be here to stay, offering agility and focus but risking fragmentation unless anchored in broader institutional cooperation and a clear strategic framework.

Figure 1: The Weimar Triangle and What it Represents



Source: [France Diplomacy](#)

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Introduction: Strategic Uncertainty in the Post-American Order

As 2025 unfolds, Europe is navigating what Ian Bremmer has termed a “G-Zero world”—a global order marked not by leadership but by power vacuums, shifting alliances, and pervasive uncertainty. Europe's strategic task is no longer about restoring a lost order, but about building resilience within disorder—by enhancing internal coordination, embracing flexibility, and preparing for scenarios that resist neat categorization. The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 has deepened the EU's insecurity, with heightened demands on NATO spending and signs of U.S. disengagement from Ukraine, exposing Europe's reliance on an increasingly unpredictable ally.

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Europe's internal divisions are deepening. Eastern states see Russia as an existential threat requiring hard deterrence, while Western capitals adopt a more cautious stance. Hungary defies sanctions, Italy and Slovakia express war fatigue, and France balances military posture with diplomatic outreach, partly shaped by its interests in Africa. These rifts are amplified by domestic unrest, as populists leverage inflation and energy insecurity to question the long-term viability of confrontation with Russia. Militarization adds another layer of tension, disproportionately benefiting countries with strong defense industries while others bear high costs with limited returns.

The Return of the Weimar Format

Amid growing pressures on the EU's fiscal framework, continued economic strains and the continued fallout of the war in Ukraine, a new axis is taking shape among European powers. Germany, France, and Poland—once loosely coordinated through the “Weimar Triangle”—are repositioning themselves as a core group. Originally established in 1991 to foster regional dialogue, the format had faded into irrelevance until its recent revival. The idea was to create a special relationship between these countries, based on the Franco-German model of cooperation.

While the war in Ukraine has shaken international norms and accelerated the unravelling of the liberal order, it has also breathed new life into the Weimar format. In March 2024, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz and Donald Tusk met in Berlin to renew the Weimar format, focusing chiefly on supporting Ukraine. Following the war in Ukraine, the Weimar three issued [a document focusing on how to make the EU more effective](#). The document emphasizes need to bolster European security and defence by creating a strong European pillar inside NATO. Weimar Agenda also calls for mobilising defence funding and closing Europe's military capability gaps.

Notably absent from this emerging alignment are Italy and Spain—two of the EU's largest member states. Initially, their exclusion reflects both geographic and political considerations. Geographically, the Weimar group positions itself along the East-Central European axis, closer to the Ukrainian border and more immediately exposed to the conflict's spillover effects. Politically, the alignment between France, Germany, and Poland signals a convergence of strategic priorities: support for NATO, commitment to Ukraine, and shared interest in defense rearmament. Italy, by contrast, has pursued a more transactional approach to security and Spain, meanwhile, has remained relatively peripheral to the defense debate, focusing instead on domestic economic concerns and Mediterranean issues.

In recognition of these limitations, 2025 saw the launch of a more inclusive structure—Weimar+. First named in February 2025, this expanded format broadens the original triangle to include the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and the European Commission, with foreign ministers acting as primary representatives.

Easing the Fiscal Straitjacket for Defense

The renewed Weimar Format is not only shaping Europe's geopolitical alignment—it is also driving a subtle redefinition of the EU's fiscal orthodoxy. Traditionally seen as a staunch defender of budgetary discipline, Germany's recent pivot toward expansive defense spending—echoed by France and Poland to some extent—has added momentum to the effort to ease EU fiscal rules in response to the security crisis triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine.

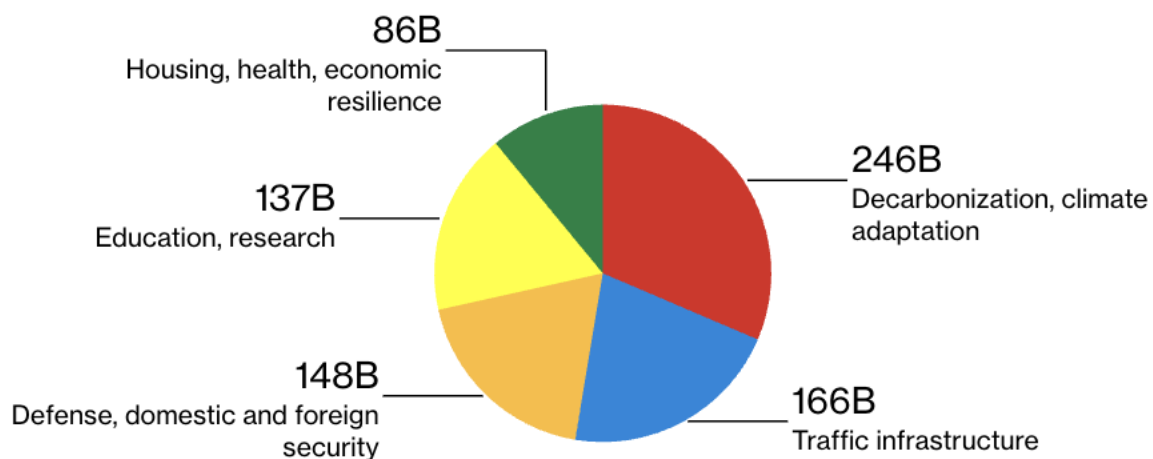
In its simplest form, before the recent reform, the Stability and Growth Pact requires member states to keep debt below 60% of GDP and budget deficits under 3%. If breached, spending limits are imposed, with potential fines. However, these rules can be suspended during major EU-wide shocks under the “general escape clause,” as was done during the Covid-19 pandemic to enable crisis spending.

Amid the pressure from the US to spend more on its own security, the EU prepares to temporarily ease its fiscal rules to invest more in defence. In March 2025, [the EU Commission has invited Member States to activate](#) the national escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact, which will provide them additional budgetary space to increase their defence spending, within the EU fiscal rules.

Germany: New Fiscal Era

Germany, long a defender of strict EU budget rules, now seeks flexibility as it prepares major spending. Finance Minister Lars Klingbeil, under a €1tn stimulus plan from Chancellor Merz to rearm and boost the economy, is tasked with investing heavily in defence and infrastructure (**Figure 1**). While Berlin has suspended its own debt limits, analysts say it is likely to breach the very EU rules it once championed—despite recent exemptions for defence spending.

Figure 1: Additional Investment Needs from 2025 to 2030



Source: [Bloomberg](#)

Germany’s debt ratio is at 62%, with falling tax revenues expected to widen its deficit and potentially push debt toward 80% of GDP in the coming years. Despite this, Berlin’s spending plans have broad support, as they align with revised EU rules and a €150bn defence loans package aimed at helping member states meet NATO targets. Sixteen member states, including Germany, Poland, the Baltics, Denmark, and Finland, have applied for the exemption.

France: Deficit Narrower Than Expected

France currently runs the largest fiscal deficit in the euro area, with slow progress on reining in spending. France’s 2024 budget deficit came in lower than anticipated, offering the government limited relief as it works to rein in its debt. Budget deficit rose to 5.8% of GDP in 2023, slightly below the Finance Ministry’s 6% forecast, offering limited relief after recent fiscal setbacks. The government now aims to reduce the deficit to 5.4% in 2024 and meet the EU’s 3% target by 2029. However, slow growth and Macron’s push for higher defense spending pose significant challenges to this consolidation plan.

Figure 2: France's Deficit



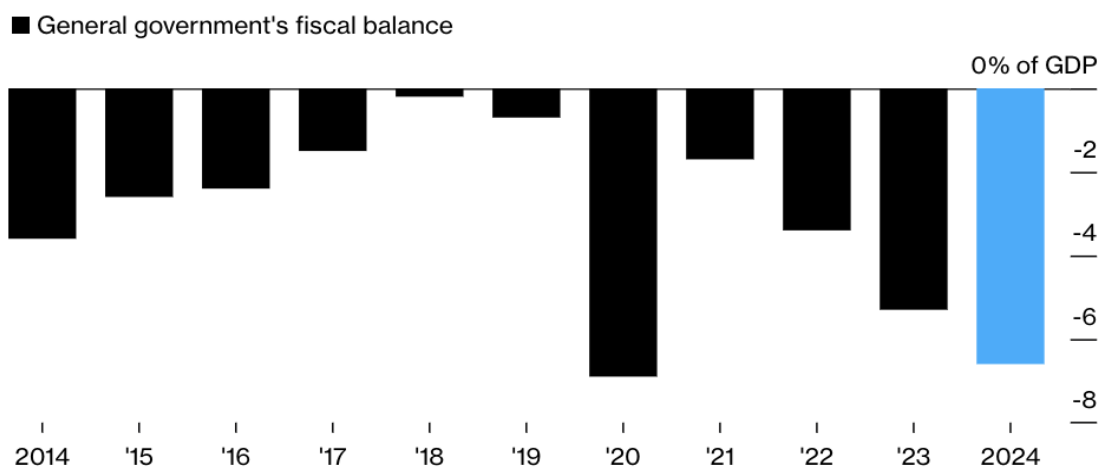
Source: [Bloomberg](#)

Poland: Deficits for Deterrence

A proposed exemption for defence spending was welcomed by Warsaw, which has cited its record-high NATO defence outlays as the main driver of its deficit and may encourage more spending. In this context, Poland is unlikely to rein in its fiscal deficit soon, as looser EU rules may encourage more spending ahead of elections. The 2024 deficit rose to 6.6% of GDP—above the Finance Ministry's 5.7% forecast—due to increased defence outlays, weak consumption, and flood-related emergency costs.

Despite an EU warning for breaching the 3% deficit threshold, Prime Minister Donald Tusk proposed a 2025 budget with a 5.5% deficit to boost his party's chances in the May presidential election. The vote was considered critical for Tusk to break the legislative deadlock caused by President Duda, but eventually that battle was narrowly lost in favour of President Karol Nawrocki, who was elected with 50.9% of votes. Still, any future spending cuts risk eroding his party's narrow lead over the nationalist Law & Justice ahead of the 2027 general election.

Figure 3: Polish Fiscal Deficit



Source: [Bloomberg](#)

From National Budgets to Strategic Investment

This convergence of defense, diplomacy, and fiscal strategy highlights a deeper shift. The Weimar countries are effectively reframing defense spending not as a deviation from fiscal discipline but as an investment in Europe's sovereignty and strategic resilience. While earlier efforts to broaden what qualifies under EU fiscal exemptions had stalled, the new geopolitical context—paired with Weimar coordination—has forced a reassessment. Germany's Finance Ministry is preparing a medium-term budget plan to align its stimulus with EU growth and security objectives, and is actively seeking support from Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

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A Coalition of the Willing: Informal Alliances and Strategic Signaling

The recent visit to Kyiv by a group of European leaders—Merz, Macron, Starmer, Tusk, and Zelensky—represents a new iteration of coalition diplomacy operating outside formal EU or NATO frameworks. This “coalition of the willing” reflects a growing trend toward mini-lateralism in European security policy, where national leaders converge informally to exert collective pressure. Since February, European leaders have held multiple summits to fill the void left by the U.S. and reaffirm support for Ukraine.

The episode underscores how leadership optics and informal groupings are becoming powerful tools of strategic signaling. In bypassing institutional inertia, these leaders demonstrated resolve and unity in support of Ukraine, even as formal alliances remain gridlocked. This signals not only a recalibration of Europe's military diplomacy but also a response to perceived American retrenchment under Trump. As Zelensky's subsequent outreach to the newly appointed Pope suggests, the coalition is also leveraging moral authority and global symbolism to consolidate international support.

Such developments highlight a broader transformation of European diplomacy—from structured alliance politics to flexible, high-visibility coalitions capable of rapid response and influence. However, this strategy is not without risks: the informal nature of such groups can sideline EU mechanisms, deepen internal divisions, and complicate the legitimacy of future negotiations.

Yet the coalition remains weak. Military aid lags behind Ukraine's needs, with promised weapons years from deployment and sanctions on Russia largely symbolic. Plans for a post-ceasefire peacekeeping force have stalled. Initial proposals of over 100,000 troops have shrunk to discussions of 20,000, with no consensus on roles or contributors. Many European militaries lack the capacity after years of underfunding and depleted arsenals. Romania and Poland, once vocal supporters, have ruled out sending troops, citing fears about U.S. disengagement from NATO and the need to prioritize homeland defense.

The Rise of Mini-Lateralism

The re-emergence of a core group within the European Union—such as the Weimar Format involving Germany, France, and Poland and the Coalition of the Willing—signals a shift toward a more flexible, but potentially fragmented, mode of European governance. While such mini-lateral formats may enhance strategic agility and offer more decisive leadership in crises like the war in Ukraine, they risk undermining the cohesion of the broader EU bloc. While exclusive groupings, these developments may signal the early stages of deeper coordination—not only on military strategy but also on fiscal policy and industrial planning. If sustained, this approach could evolve into a more widely adopted model of European strategic governance.