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Towards British–German leadership for a new era of European geopolitics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the worsening geopolitical environment in Europe, the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany are pivotal. There is no other option than for the continent's two largest economies to combine forces in the face of Russia's unrelenting aggression.
- The Trinity House Agreement is the starting point, but the two allies can do much more to strengthen the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), particularly as the United States (US) prioritises meeting the growth of Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific.
- Britain and Germany should redouble their efforts in amplifying support for Ukraine, cooperating on European nuclear deterrence, and challenging the growing alignment between authoritarian states.



1. The United Kingdom (UK) and Germany are pivotal to the defence of Europe. The two countries find themselves in a transformational moment for the international order. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – if not since 2014, when the Kremlin annexed Crimea and fomented war in the Donbas – the geopolitical environment in Europe has drastically changed. What was once thought of as the world's first 'postmodern zone' has been plunged into geopolitical intrigue.¹
2. At the same time, the Euro-Atlantic has been 'decentralised': Britain and Germany's home theatre is no longer as axial as it was in the Cold War. Rapid economic growth in the Indo-Pacific, connected to the geopolitical rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC), has propelled the region to the apex of international affairs. As well as this, the emergence of the 'CRINK' – the growing alignment between the PRC, Russia, Iran and North Korea – has shifted the global balance of power further in the autocracies' favour.²
3. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – the foundation of British and German strategic policy – now faces the dual challenge of Russian aggression to its east and a more transactional and Indo-Pacific focused United States (US) to its west. In this new environment, the US expects the UK, Germany and other European nations to step up and assume more of the burden. In the event of a major crisis in the Indo-Pacific, they must be ready for a renewed Russian push to destabilise the continent.
4. While European countries have finally acknowledged the turning tide of international politics, they have been late in taking action to mitigate the impact, although they are now making efforts to prepare. The European Union (EU) White Paper on Defence of March 2025 and the UK's Strategic Defence Review (SDR) of June 2025 recognise the need for increased defence spending in the face of increasing threats and challenges to security in Europe and beyond.³
5. While the relationship between London and Berlin has faced significant obstacles following Britain's departure from the EU, both nations are once again enhancing their bilateral relations to provide greater stability for

¹ See: Robert Cooper, *The Post Modern State and the World Order* (London: Demos, 1996).

² For more on the CRINK, see: James Rogers, 'Rise of the CRINK?', *Britain's World*, 24/10/2024, <https://www.britainsworld.org.uk/> (checked: 11/07/2025).

³ See: 'Introducing the White Paper for European Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan – Readiness 2030', European Commission, 12/03/2025, <https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/> (checked: 11/07/2025) and 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025: Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/07/2025).



Europe and contribute to the maintenance of a free and open international order. The Trinity House Agreement, signed between London and Berlin on 23rd October 2024, is the starting point for a deeper and more structured bilateral relationship, similar to the agreements the UK has with France.⁴

6. It is in this context that the Council on Geostrategy and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung decided to host a conference to discuss how to deepen British and German cooperation and enhance both countries' geopolitical position in relation to their adversaries. Held on 19th June 2025 at The Army and Navy Club (The Rag) in London, this conference comprised three panels, which focused on the following themes:
 - a. Britain and Germany: Enhancing deterrence in the new Europe;
 - b. Britain, Germany and Europe: Towards a new era of defence-industrial cooperation;
 - c. 'Global Europe': How Britain and Germany can shape the global security environment.
7. These Proceedings outline the key findings from these panels, arranged thematically in accordance with the predominant topics arising during the presentations and discussions. It ends with three concrete recommendations on how the UK and Germany can work closer together to deter threats to NATO.

Geopolitical and security challenges faced by European countries

1. Russia poses – in the words of the SDR – an 'immediate' and 'pressing' threat to NATO following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, not least because of its extensive 'sub-threshold' operations across the continent.⁵ The Kremlin has also moved its economy and society closer to a war footing, meaning that it will remain a threat to NATO despite significant losses in Ukraine.

⁴ 'UK-Germany Trinity House Agreement on Defence', Ministry of Defence, 23/10/2024, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/07/2025).

⁵ 'Strategic Defence Review 2025: Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/07/2025).



2. While the SDR highlights the extent of the threat from Russia, it also stresses that the PRC has become a 'sophisticated' and 'persistent' challenge and that Iran and North Korea are 'regional disruptors'.⁶ As coordination between these CRINK nations grows, the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions are becoming ever more linked.
3. Due to the growing threat from the PRC to American interests in the Indo-Pacific, however, European countries can no longer expect the outside world, particularly the US, to come to their aid. America has been signalling its 'pivot to Asia' for over a decade and, under the Trump administration, its reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific is likely to accelerate.
4. Economic statecraft and economic warfare have returned to the world stage, with European countries facing economic disruption from the need to draw down from dependency on Russian hydrocarbons, the PRC's industrial overcapacity, and the US adopting an increasingly mercantilist outlook.
5. Rapid advancements are occurring in global technological innovation, particularly military systems. This is exemplified by 'drone warfare': first utilised by Daesh during the Battle of Mosul, within a decade, Russia and Ukraine have both adopted the mass use of this technology. In Operation SPIDER'S WEB, Ukraine inflicted severe damage on Russia's strategic bomber fleet. The changing nature of conflict in Ukraine demonstrates the importance of staying abreast of technological developments and European countries' need to enhance resilience to asymmetric tactics.
6. These underlying trends show that geopolitical risk has risen, and will likely continue to rise for the rest of the decade. As the world shifts from a unipolar to a multipolar order, global conflict patterns could return to the pre-1945 era. Whatever the future holds, it is clear that the post-Cold War 'peace dividend' is over, and European rearmament is a necessity.

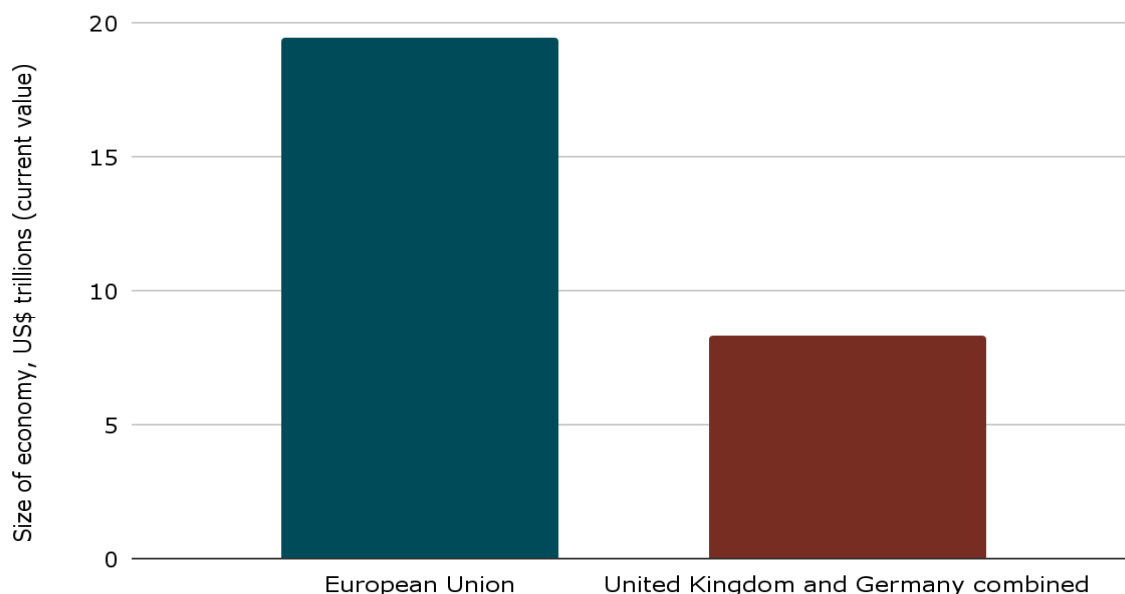
⁶ Strategic Defence Review 2025: Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 11/07/2025).



How Britain and Germany currently cooperate on defence

1. Since the 1950s, there has been deep bilateral defence cooperation between the UK and Germany; the result of both nations being NATO allies and the partnership which developed from the presence of the British Army of the Rhine in West Germany during the Cold War. Britain and (West) Germany also have a rich history of defence industrial collaboration, working together to develop the Panavia Tornado and Eurofighter Typhoon strike fighters. While the British and German defence relationship may have atrophied during the 2000s, it has grown more important since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the US.
2. The British-German partnership is critical to European security, as Britain and Germany are the two most powerful countries in Europe, with complementary capabilities. The UK and Germany have the two largest economies in Europe – the equivalent of 43% of the EU's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (see: Graph 1).

GRAPH 1: SIZE OF ECONOMIES BY GDP, 2024, US\$ TRILLIONS (CURRENT VALUE)⁷

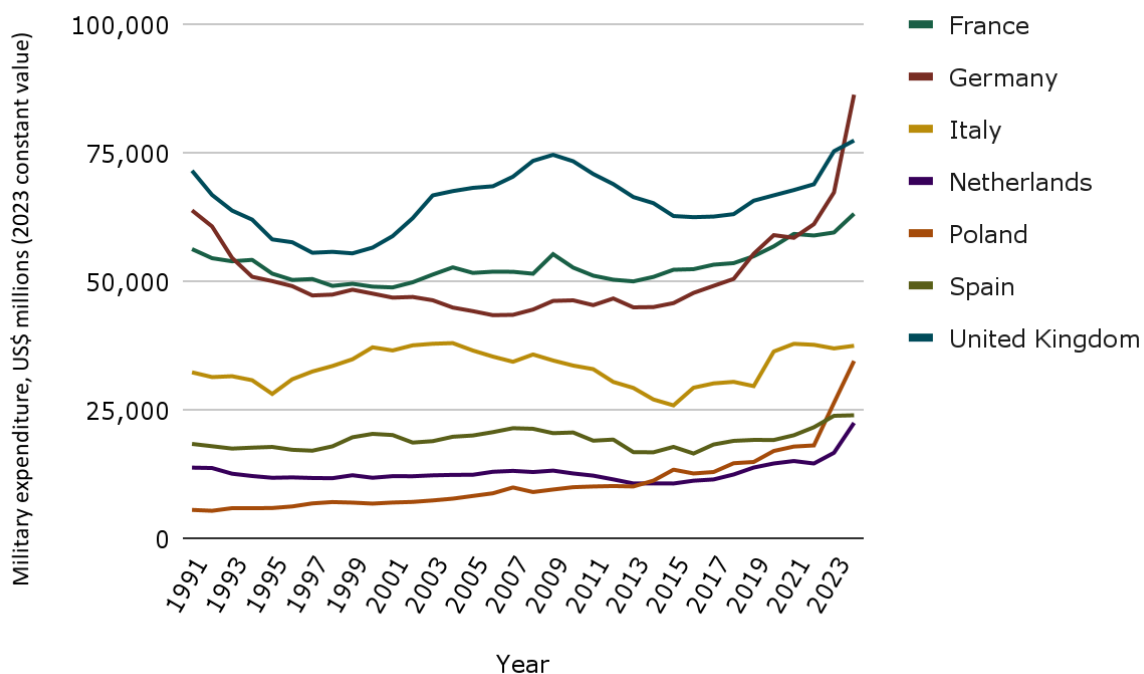


⁷ See: 'GDP (Current US\$)', World Bank, No date, <https://data.worldbank.org/> (checked: 11/07/2025).



3. In addition, in part courtesy of Germany's recent increases in defence spending, the two powers currently have the highest military budgets on the continent (see: Graph 2), albeit not the largest by percentage of GDP (see: Graph 3). Therefore, both countries will be central to driving Europe's rearmament and enhancing its deterrent capabilities.

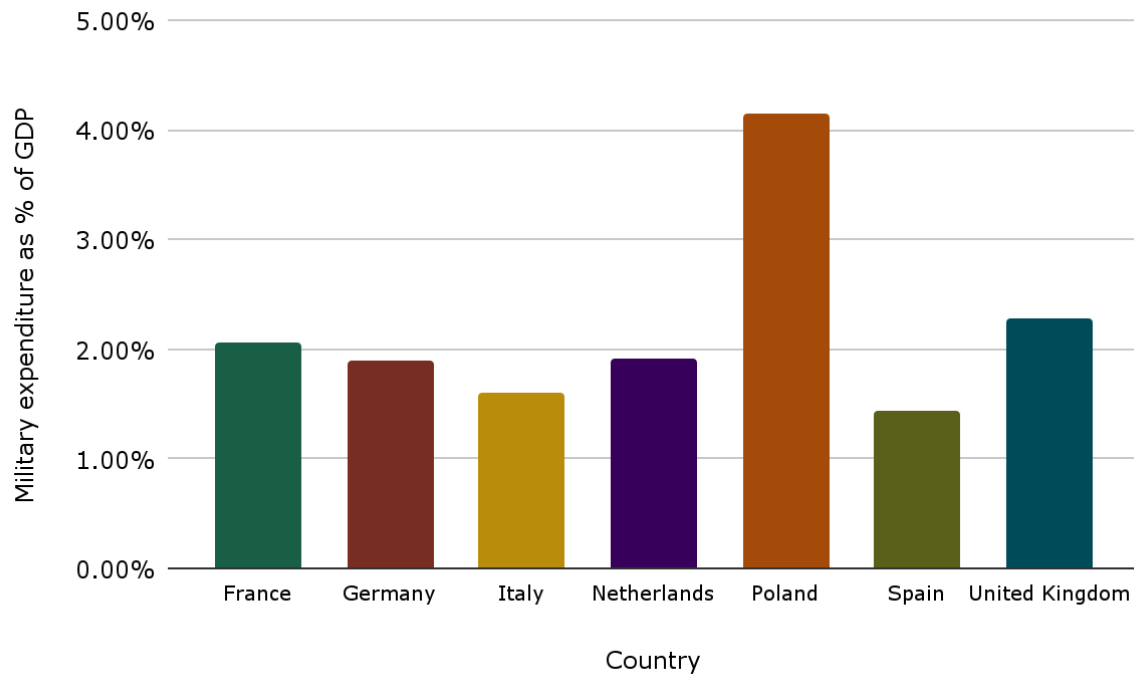
GRAPH 2: MILITARY EXPENDITURE, 1991-2024, US\$ MILLIONS (2023 CONSTANT VALUE)⁸



⁸ See: 'SIPRI Military Expenditure Database', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 01/06/2025, <https://milex.sipri.org/> (checked: 11/07/2025).



GRAPH 3: MILITARY EXPENDITURE, 2024, AS % OF GDP⁹



4. Vitally, both Britain and Germany presently enjoy relatively strong political positions, with stable governments which have at least four years until their next respective general elections. This window of opportunity should be acted upon to enhance bilateral collaboration on defence. The Trinity House Agreement provides the first step towards doing so, but there is a risk that competing political priorities and a lack of focus could weaken the agreement.

How Britain and Germany should cooperate politically on defence

1. In the UK, 13 out of 34 ministerial positions will be affected by the Trinity House Agreement, as will 15 federal departments in Germany. Enhancing communication and cooperation between departments in both governments

⁹ See: 'SIPRI Military Expenditure Database', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 01/06/2025, <https://milex.sipri.org/> (checked: 11/07/2025).



will be necessary, and adopting a ‘whole-of-government’ approach will result in the best possible outcomes from the agreement.

2. Political buy-in is required: the Trinity House Agreement was a project between the Labour Party and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), but with the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) winning the 2025 German general election, the agreement will need Friedrich Merz, Chancellor of Germany, fully on board.
3. The public in both countries should be informed about the geopolitical situation and what is at stake for Britain and Germany. Without doing so, public opinion will not support large-scale rearmament efforts, nor will there be widespread understanding of the motives for supporting Ukraine or the Baltic States, for example. To mitigate this, London and Berlin should work to link defence to the daily lives of their citizens, such as through the cost-of-living crisis, the centrality of subsea infrastructure to providing energy and digital services, and the impact of cyber attacks.
4. The UK and Germany are members of many other international groupings which could be used to maximise the bilateral defence relationship even further. These include the Weimar+, European Three (E3) and Group of Seven (G7) minilateral arrangements.

How Britain and Germany should cooperate on a defence industrial basis

1. Both Britain and Germany should play to their strengths. The UK is a nuclear and naval power, backed by strong intelligence agencies and a highly developed defence technology sector, but it lacks financial headroom and needs to expand its existing industrial base. Germany has fiscal capacity – especially after removing its debt brake for defence spending – and an advanced industrial base, but has, until recently, struggled politically to increase investment in defence. It also lacks a strong technology sector and startup culture. The two allies’ complementary strengths and weaknesses should be used to guide future defence industrial cooperation.
2. The Trinity House Agreement is mentioned in the SDR as a blueprint for bilateral cooperation. It is filled with ‘lighthouse projects’ including



long-range precision strike missiles, the Boxer Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) and the Poseidon P-8 maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft. Such cooperative defence industrial projects often last for decades and require significant investment.

3. However, what is said and what is done are not the same, creating a ‘say-do’ gap. As such, there is considerable potential to boost both the British and German defence industries, support jobs, generate economic growth and deter threats to NATO. To take advantage of this, both nations should look to further cooperative defence industrial initiatives.
4. Effective procurement should go hand-in-hand with even higher investment in defence capabilities. Both countries have agreed to spend more on defence, with the stated purpose of enhancing European security, but how this extra funding is used is just as important.
5. As large European spenders on Research and Development (R&D), the UK and Germany should combine efforts on defence technological advancement. This is particularly important to maintain asymmetric advantage in an era of rapid innovation. In Ukraine, for example, military technology and tactics are developing rapidly; Ukrainians are able to go from idea to implementation within three months. Britain and Germany should focus on nurturing startup cultures for defence, as speed and experimentation are crucial to contemporary warfare.
6. To close the ‘say-do’ gap, the UK and Germany should forge closer ties between their defence industries and governmental departments. This could include the following:
 - a. Creating a forum for multiple meetings per year between British and German officials and industry stakeholders;
 - b. Enhancing interoperability between the two nations’ armed forces via joint training missions;
 - c. Aligning defence industrial strategies;
 - d. Developing a stronger defence export market to maintain production lines and increase profits to reinvest in the defence industrial sector;
 - e. Increasing private sector investment, as this will be key in driving procurement and innovation. Regulations should be modified to allow for more private investment in defence.

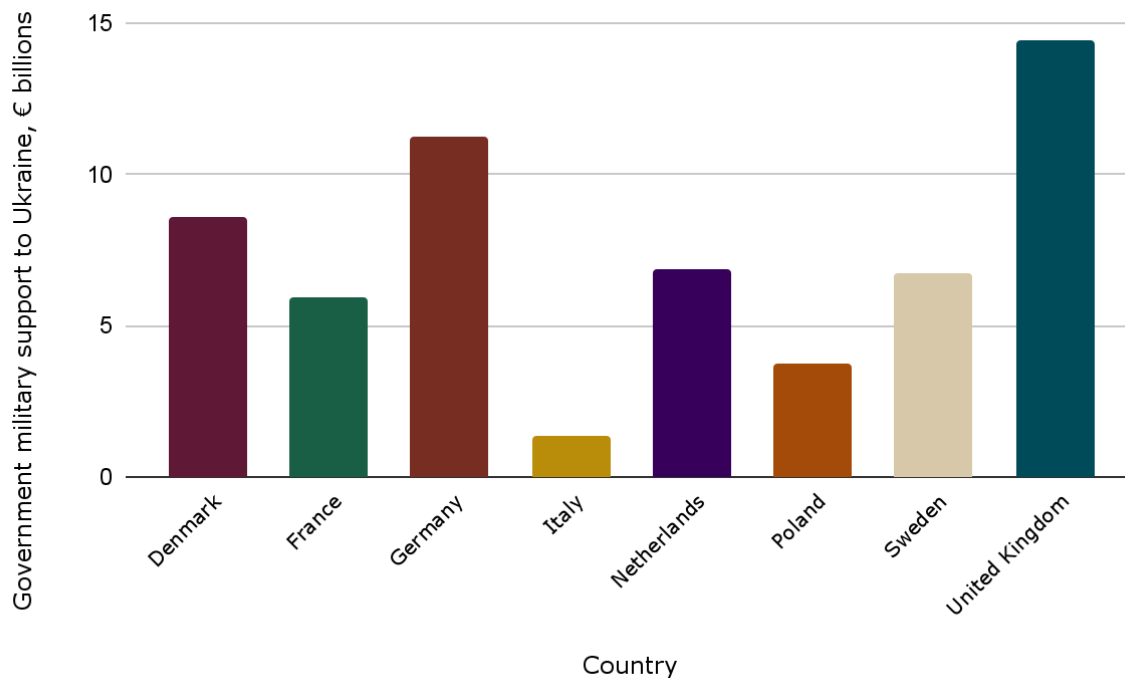


How Britain and Germany should take the lead in deterring threats to NATO

1. If Russia prevails in Ukraine, it will loom over the Black Sea region and pose a continued – even growing – threat to NATO, and European security. A victorious Russia would be an emboldened Russia, and an emboldened Russia may feel confident enough to expand operations to other European countries, especially those which have provided the most assistance to Ukraine.
2. Consequently, upholding Ukraine's sovereignty is a vital geostrategic objective for both London and Berlin. By pinning Russia down militarily, Ukraine provides European countries time to rearm and expand their defence industrial bases. Meeting Russian aggression in Ukraine is the cheapest and most effective means to enhance European security.
3. But this is not enough; Ukraine must prevail. London and Berlin should lead European nations to support Kyiv with additional military aid – especially long-range 'deep strike' weapons – and assist with the expansion of Ukraine's defence sector. Britain and Germany are currently the largest European military donors to Kyiv (see: Graph 4), and should continue to push NATO and EU countries to increase their support for Ukraine as well.



GRAPH 4: GOVERNMENT SUPPORT TO UKRAINE IN MILITARY AID SINCE FEBRUARY 2022, € BILLIONS¹⁰



4. Nuclear deterrence would be severely weakened if the US decided to withdraw its nuclear umbrella, or significant numbers of the conventional American forces which help to 'extend' it. Although the UK is renewing its Trident programme and re-equipping itself with a sub-strategic nuclear capability, and France is a nuclear nation, Britain and Germany should support each other in strengthening the European pillar of NATO's nuclear deterrent. Options include a British-German project to develop nuclear weapons to fire from F-35A Lightning II Joint Combat Aircraft – which both nations are acquiring – and efforts to deploy more British and German forces to non-nuclear NATO allies on the eastern front of the alliance.
5. Finally, the structure and capabilities of European armed forces vary widely. To operate effectively, Britain and Germany should ensure military cohesion and cooperation, such as in doctrine and equipment, and take steps to reduce language barriers. Doing so will enhance European deterrence of Russia and the wider CRINK.

¹⁰ See: 'Ukraine Support Tracker', Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 30/04/2025, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/> (checked: 11/07/2025).



How Britain and Germany should shape the global order

1. For both the UK and Germany, areas other than the Euro-Atlantic are supplemental. But both countries retain global interests. This is why Britain declared in its SDR that a 'NATO First' doctrine does not mean 'NATO only', especially considering the growing connection between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. Meanwhile, Germany's key defence priorities are focused on developing strong terrestrial and air forces for European defence, coupled with expeditionary capabilities to carry out small-scale operations globally, such as evacuation, multinational reassurance and disaster relief missions.
2. On a range of global issues, European nations – even Britain and Germany – have been only partially successful in recent years. Russia has benefitted from the French withdrawal from the Sahel, and Europeans have been largely sidelined in ceasefire talks regarding Ukraine and the Middle East.
3. To respond to growing geopolitical threats and shape the global security environment, Britain and Germany require a plan of action to draw together a powerful nucleus of European states to secure their vital interests on the global stage. Using the Trinity House Agreement as the springboard, the UK and Germany should enhance bilateral and multilateral cooperation. London and Berlin should also expand their engagement with their global allies and partners to ensure their interests around the world are better protected.
4. Britain and Germany should take the lead in pushing this cooperation forwards due to their international prestige and membership of multinational institutions, such as NATO, the G7 and, in the UK's case, a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.
5. Engagement with the so-called 'Global South' is crucial. By itself, military strength will not be enough to gain advantage in developing countries, particularly as the PRC and the wider CRINK increase their investment and involvement in Africa, Asia and South America. Britain and Germany, alongside other free and open nations, should ensure that they remain active in these regions to shape global narratives effectively. Both countries should review and coordinate their development assistance – the UK and Germany are large donors – to ensure it is effectively and efficiently targeted.



6. Finally, Britain and Germany should challenge the CRINK. The CRINK remains in its infancy with limited cooperation between the nations, meaning there are opportunities for European and other free and open countries to mitigate the growing alignment between the autocracies. Three of the four CRINK nations are regional actors, with corresponding strategic objectives and military capabilities; only the PRC has global ambitions and capabilities. Therefore, challenging the CRINK nations in their own neighbourhoods will ensure that they do not gain an advantage.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CLOSE THE 'SAY-DO' GAP

Britain and Germany should cooperate in forging closer defence ties. This could include creating bilateral forums for officials and industry stakeholders, conducting joint training missions, aligning defence industrial strategies, developing a defence export market, and easing regulation on private sector defence investment. London and Berlin should also advance a positive narrative for rearmament to ensure their populations are on board.

2. GALVANISE POLITICAL WILL TO FACILITATE A UKRAINIAN VICTORY

Unless Ukraine prevails, Russia may grow stronger and more determined to revise the Euro-Atlantic order. The UK and Germany should set an example for other European nations by increasing their assistance to Ukraine, while working together to ensure a Ukrainian victory.

3. ENHANCE COOPERATION ON EUROPEAN NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Britain and France, as nuclear powers, and Germany, as Europe's largest economy, should cooperate to strengthen the European pillar of NATO's nuclear deterrent. This could take the form of developing a genuinely European system to deliver sub-strategic warheads from the F-35A Lightning II Joint Combat Aircraft, which Britain and Germany are both acquiring.



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