

Opinion – Germany, Europe and Potential Outcomes of the Ukraine War

Written by Hans-Georg Ehrhart

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/01/19/opinion-germany-europe-and-potential-outcomes-of-the-ukraine-war/>

HANS-GEORG EHRHART, JAN 19 2025

The war in Ukraine is deeply affecting the future of Germany and Europe. But one thing is for sure: there will be a day after. Since war has a tendency to escalate into extremes, it must be politically contained with the aim of ending it as soon as possible and preventing it in the future. This is particularly relevant when, as in the case of the war in Ukraine, nuclear powers are directly and indirectly involved. Therefore, after three years of heavy combat, it makes sense to hypothesize the war's possible outcomes and risks, as well as its consequences for Germany and Europe. I assume three possible scenarios: 1. Russia wins the war. 2. Ukraine wins the war. 3. Nobody wins and the conflict then remains in an unstable stalemate. The first scenario is unlikely but entails a high risk for Germany and Europe. The second scenario is less unlikely but is also associated with a high risk due to the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons. The third scenario is more likely and presents a comparatively lower, nonetheless sensible risk. Taking each of these scenarios into account, we can reach the following conclusions:

First, Germany has – apart from its muddling through approach practiced until now – various security policy options depending on the outcome of the war in Ukraine: 1. The completion of a fully integrated EU defense, economic and financial union. 2. The assumption of a quasi-hegemonic leadership role as the primary American mainland sword in Europe. 3. The assumption of a strong nationalist role in Europe. 4. The formation of a European Caucus within NATO and close security policy cooperation between NATO and the EU. It wouldn't actually take the war in Ukraine to implement these options in one form or another. However, so far, the political will and the corresponding framework conditions have been lacking. The war in Ukraine and its aftermath could produce both. However, facing snap-elections already on 23 February 2025, most of the relevant political parties do not clearly argue in favor of one of these options. They still prefer a muddling-through approach. The only exception is the right-wing AFD (Alternative for Germany) who wants to leave NATO and the EU as well as to stop the sanctions against Russia. While the AFD is clearly striving for the third option, Social Democrats lean more toward the fourth, the Greens to the first and Christian Democrats to the second option.

Second, the outcome of the war in Ukraine will have a decisive impact on German and European security. The possibility of a Russian victory would entail high security risks for Germany and Europe and would have far-reaching negative consequences for Ukraine and the stability of the continent. It should, therefore, absolutely be prevented. A Ukrainian victory may be desirable, but it is associated with a high risk of nuclear escalation, which could lead to the destruction of Ukraine, or even Europe. A stalemate would probably result in a new "Cold War", which, at best, could be transformed into a "Cold Peace" in the form of non-violent competition between systems. At worst, it would mean permanent tensions and the threat of war in the sense of a constant struggle for the right order.

Third, there are three common truths when dealing with European security: One is that Russia remains a relevant Eastern European neighbor for Germany and the EU in terms of geography and potential. The other common truth is that the USA will remain an indispensable player in European security for the foreseeable future, also during the second term of Donald Trump. Germany and Europe thus have an interest in appropriate US involvement in and for Europe. The third common truth is that China plays a significant role in this conflict. In the event of a Russian victory China could feel encouraged to use force to achieve its goals concerning Taiwan. A Russian defeat would compromise Chinese ambitions and allow the US to focus on Beijing. That is why China has no interest in a defeated

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Russia. A stalemate in the Ukraine war, leading to a stable armistice, would tie the US to Europe and enable Beijing to play the role of mediator, whose influence in Europe and Russia would increase.

Fourth, regardless of the scenario, Berlin will have to spend more on its own and EU defense. The more the US involvement in Europe decreases, the greater the German and European defense burden will be. In the current election campaign parties from the political center are competing with tough announcements on higher defense expenditures going from “more than 2 percent” of GDP (Christian Democrats, Social Democrats) to 3 percent (Christian Social Union) to 3.5 percent (Greens). Moreover, Germany’s share of the support costs for Ukraine is likely to increase although it is already the biggest European supporter in terms of total bilateral allocations. At the same time, Berlin must advance the European integration project and contribute to the economic and political stabilization of Eastern Europe. This is expected to lead to increased national budget conflicts and social tensions in Germany which could favor extremist parties. In order to minimize such conflicts, possibilities for peaceful coexistence with an imperialist Russia must be explored.

Since a victorious peace is unlikely for any of the protagonists and the costs of war are constantly rising not only for the direct opponents of the war but also for their supporters and the not-inconsiderable number of states that are staying out, Berlin should strive for a settlement along the lines of the third scenario. This combines a territorial compromise acceptable to both opponents with the maintenance of Ukraine’s legal position and postpones a final settlement to the future. While being staunch supporters of a Ukraine victory, the parties of the political center have started to realize the new realities, however, do not yet draw the respective conclusions. The parties from the extreme left and right spectrum are already arguing in the direction of the third scenario but they have a negative concept of both pillars of European stability, NATO und EU, and a naïve view of the aggressor Russia.

Germany should be aware that the bon mot attributed to the first Secretary General of NATO, Lord Hastings Ismay, still applies in a modified form: NATO is there to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans involved (instead of “down”, as in the original quote). It continues to be in Germany’s interest to work towards restoring the Harmel formula of 1967, according to which sufficient defense capability and détente can enable security between system opponents. After all, Russia will not disappear from the scene and will one day be interested in co-operation again. Finally, Berlin should be careful not to grow into a hegemonic role in the long run because this could entice conflict and the build-up of counter-alliances. This means staying engaged in the European project and investing in European integration more than ever.

About the author:

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