

meet the threat posed by Stalin's Red Army — which was standing in Berlin, at the center of Europe — but also to alleviate Europeans' fears of German revanchism. This US decision created the conditions for moving toward "ever-closer union" in Europe. It was America's presence on the continent that allowed for Germany's eventual reunification and the eastward enlargement of NATO and the EU. Europe as we know it would never have emerged otherwise. What, then, does Europe's post-American future hold? Can it manage its security and maintain its unity without the US? For Germany, with its own history of hegemonic aspirations on the continent, America's withdrawal raises difficult questions.

Does the current generation of German political leadership exhibit the historical sensitivities needed to assume a new role, in partnership with France and others? The rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland shows that nothing can be taken for granted. On the question of who will lead Europe, there is no alternative to Germany and France. The two strongest European powers must step up to fill the vacuum. No longer can Europeans simply wait for the US to provide the necessary leadership. One wonders if Americans realize that they are destroying the greatest diplomatic success in their own history, as well as significantly weakening the foundation of American power and

prosperity. There is no reason to think that the US can simply dispense with its strategic counterpart and suffer no costs. Unfortunately, the window for reversing course has closed. The long American protectorate has come to an end under Trump, and it will not return. Europe must now chart its own course. Somehow, the transatlantic relationship — the very idea of the West — will need to be redefined whenever the MAGA fever breaks. But even amid so much uncertainty, one thing remains clear: Europeans and Americans will always be stronger in the new world order together than apart.

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US Vice President JD Vance (l) gestures during a campaign event for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (r) in Budapest, Hungary, on April 7, 2026.
● JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

No more 'daddy'?

Trump becoming orphan with Euros over Iran



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OPINION

In remarks unlikely to endear him to US President Donald Trump, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, recently offered a brutally candid assessment of Washington's war on Iran.

"This whole affair is, to say the least, ill-considered," Merz said. "At the moment, I cannot see what strategic exit the Americans are opting for. The Iranians are negotiating very skillfully — or rather, very skillfully not negotiating. An entire nation (the US) is being humiliated. The Iranians are clearly stronger than one thought. The Americans clearly don't seem to have a convincing negotiating strategy." Although other European leaders have not been quite so frank, the assessment voiced by Merz is clearly widespread. Challenged by rising energy costs and inflation, they are scrambling to control the political and potentially devastating economic fallout.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez emerged early on as the leader of the anti-war front. France and Italy have sought bilateral deals with Iran to negotiate passage of their ships through the Strait of Hormuz, the world's main artery for oil trade. Even Washington's closest European ally, the United Kingdom, has distanced itself from the war, drawing Trump's ire.

Overwhelming majorities of European citizens back these positions. According to newly released data by IPSOS, a French pollster, 88% of Germans either "strongly" or "somewhat" agree that their country should not be involved in the war in the Middle East. The numbers in France are 82% against the involvement to 14% in favor of it. In the UK, the numbers are 83% to 17%, and in Italy 84% to 12%. Even more striking, according to the same survey, 35% of Europeans now believe that China will have "an overall positive influence on world affairs" as opposed to 28% who think the same of the United States.

While citizens across the continent clearly oppose the Iran war, the German case is particularly noteworthy for a number of reasons, none of them flattering



US President Donald Trump (r) and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz talk with each other in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, D.C., US, on March 3, 2026, in the midst of the US-Israeli war on Iran.
● JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

to the country's current leadership.

Merz, who has tied his political identity to transatlantic loyalty, was one of the rare European cheerleaders of a war he now decries as strategically inept. When Israel launched its attack on Iran in June 2025 — in the middle of negotiations between Washington and Tehran — Merz did not call for restraint. On the contrary, he praised Israel for doing what he called "the dirty work" on Europe's behalf.

When protests engulfed Iran in January this year, he predicted that the Iranian regime would be gone in a matter of weeks. When the US and Israel attacked again February 28, Merz said that it was "not the moment to lecture our allies, but to stand in unity."

What appears to have spurred Merz's apparent about-face is not a sudden discovery of the virtues of international law or the folly of the war. It's the fact that the war didn't go according to the plan. Instead of a swift regime change Merz banked on, there is a standoff between Washington and Tehran with no end in sight, and the double blockade of the Strait of Hormuz that has sent oil prices soaring above \$100 per barrel.

Merz's own approval ratings tanked to 19%, less than a year after assuming office, making him the least popular among Western leaders at the moment. The opposition nationalist Al-

ternative for Germany (AfD) now outperforms Merz's Christian Democracy in polls. Significantly, the AfD, unlike Merz, has opposed the war in Iran from the outset, openly calling for Germany to align its position with Spain's. The coming economic crunch, de-industrialization, inflation, instability and potential migration flows from the Middle East appear to worry German voters much more than the fate of the regime in Tehran.

While Merz's latest description of the US war is accurate, a truly honest assessment should include Germany's, and Europe's, own role in facilitating it. After all, this is the same European leadership that spent much of

last year competing to ingratiate itself with Trump — most notoriously when NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, referred to the president as "daddy," a groveling display that quickly became a continental embarrassment. That sycophancy wasn't an outlier. It was the logical endpoint of a Europe that traded strategic autonomy for Trump's fleeting approval.

In this context, Merz's early support for the US and Israel was the logical consequence of Germany's radicalizing posture towards the regime in Iran over the last few years. As a member of the E3 (with UK and France), Germany was a signatory of the 2015 nuclear deal with



US President Donald Trump (front) meets with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte (r), French President Emmanuel Macron (2nd-R), German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (3rd-R), and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, among others, in the Oval Office after his call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 18, 2025.
● DANIEL TOROK/WHITE HOUSE

Iran known as JCPOA. But rather than defend it when Trump withdrew from it in 2018, Berlin, together with London and Paris, chose to appease Trump by adopting a hardening posture on unrelated matters, such as Iran's ballistic missiles program and its support for various pro-Iranian armed groups (the "Axis of Resistance") throughout the region.

Germany, together with UK and France, pushed for a snapback of the UN Security Council's nuclear-related sanctions against Iran in 2025, aligning themselves behind the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, instead of allowing space for negotiations with Tehran to agree on the deal's successor.

Within the European Union, Germany was a leading proponent of designating the Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, in contrast to a more cautious approach promoted by France. Eventually, Berlin succeeded in convincing the doubters. Of note, however, the UK still hasn't designated the Guards.

By betting everything on regime change, Germany and its E3 partners failed to develop a separate negotiation framework, a different set of incentives, or a genuine alternative to the US-Israeli war. It is an indictment of their policy that today there are no European powers mediating the end of the war. It is Pakistan, Oman, and Turkey. They are shuttling between Tehran and Washington because they still have relationships, credibility, and diplomatic bandwidth.

And the most striking thing is no one actually misses the Europeans. Quite the contrary. The E3 is seen not as a helpful broker but as an adjunct to Washington — more likely to posture, or to issue one-sided statements than to actually de-escalate. This is a textbook case of surrendering your leverage and relevance while still having to deal with all the negative consequences. And at this point, the only thing more humiliated than the United States is the European leadership that tied its fate to a failing superpower with no clear strategy for extracting itself and the rest of the world from the ever-deepening hole it has been digging for the past two months.

The article first appeared on Responsible Statecraft.



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