HUNGARIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The UK–Germany Military Pact: Europe's New Security Paradigm or a Play Within NATO?

RUSLAN BORTNIK

HIIA Perspective
Regular publication of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Publisher:

Author(s):
Ruslan Bortnik

Copy editor: Lillian Aronson

For more publications, see the homepage of the Institute (www.hiia.hu).

Source of cover photo: Shutterstock

September 16, 2025

Ruslan Bortnik, Senior Research Fellow, HIIA

THE UK–GERMANY MILITARY PACT: EUROPE'S NEW SECURITY PARADIGM OR A PLAY WITHIN NATO?

The signing of the so-called Kensington Treaty between Germany and the United Kingdom on July 17, 2025, marks a notable moment in Europe's security landscape. Berlin and London have agreed on a bilateral mutual defense pact, which demonstratively reiterates NATO's Article 5 on their own terms, eighty years after the establishment of NATO following the end of World War II. Beyond symbolism, the treaty includes 17 projects establishing cooperation in areas ranging from next-generation missile development to strengthening NATO's eastern flank. Shaken by Russia's war in Ukraine, cracks within NATO, and the U.S. emphasis on greater European autonomy in defense, two of Europe's strongest powers are showing their readiness to create a backup security system in NATO's European part. Is this the beginning of NATO's split into smaller circles of greater security or is this a big political-economic game in response to the U.S. and growing societal uncertainty?

A BILATERAL "ARTICLE 5"?

On July 17, 2025, Germany and the United Kingdom signed a bilateral defense treaty, unprecedented in scale in the post-war era. The Kensington "Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Federal Republic of Germany on friendship and bilateral cooperation" enshrines the commitment of both sides to come to one another's aid—including militarily—in the event of an armed attack on either party. In effect, London and Berlin have introduced legislation that is very similar or even duplicates NATO's Article 5 at the bilateral level. The treaty also covers a wide scope of cooperation from joint defense projects and arms exports to coordination on migration policy. Officials described the signing as a turning point that opens a new chapter in relations between the two countries after Brexit. The treaty has not yet entered into force, however, since it has not been ratified by the parties, and Germany has stated that ratification must take place in the Bundestag.

Signing the treaty nevertheless proclaims the establishment of the most significant defense alliance in Europe since the end of World War II and the creation of NATO. Although both London and Berlin formally remain committed to NATO, the new pact goes beyond the alliance's standard obligations. For the first time in modern history, Germany has concluded a direct mutual defense agreement with one of Europe's leading military powers—and a nuclear power at that. The United Kingdom, as a nuclear-armed state, effectively provides Germany with a nuclear umbrella: An attack on Germany will be considered as a threat to Britain itself, requiring corresponding support, and vice versa. For Germany, which has no nuclear weapons of its own (although U.S. nuclear weapons are located on its territory), this strategically strengthens deterrence because Berlin now has bilateral security assurances from both European nuclear powers: France and the UK.

The treaty includes 17 joint projects aimed at deepening defense integration. Among them are the development of a next-generation long-range deep precision strike missile with a range of over two thousand kilometers, the reinforcement of anti-submarine defense in the north, cooperation on unmanned systems, and the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank. The parties also agreed to pool efforts to export military equipment produced jointly—for example, Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft and Boxer armored vehicles—to external markets. Thus, the bilateral pact goes beyond political declarations: It contains concrete programs intended to enhance the defense capabilities of both countries and of Europe as a whole.

Why do two leading NATO members need a separate agreement that duplicates the key obligations of the alliance? The reasons are multidimensional and include the transformed security environment in Europe, weakening confidence in existing mechanisms, and the perceived need to send political signals to the United States and the public in their countries.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the ongoing war in Europe have increased the sense of threat on the continent and demonstrated the limits of previous security constructions. Despite support for Kyiv, NATO as an organization could not prevent a conflict on Europe's doorstep, and this situation could be repeated in the future. In Eastern Europe in particular, there is anxiety that Moscow's appetite may extend to NATO states themselves, prompting a buildup of defense by all available means.

Second, growing indecision within NATO has occasionally raised questions about the solidity of collective security guarantees. The alliance has encountered institutional challenges: Naturally, reaching consensus among 31 countries is complex, as illustrated by the differing views on assistance to Ukraine. Furthermore, NATO formally provides no guarantees to states outside its membership, and the West's reluctance to intervene directly beyond NATO's borders (as in Georgia in 2008 or in Ukraine today) has underscored the vulnerability of Europe's security "gray zone." These factors contribute to uncertainty about whether allies would respond with equal determination if a crisis were to threaten their security. It also increases the feeling of anxiety and pessimism within European societies, which in turn drives internal instability and loss of confidence. This negatively affects assessments and plans for the future of European economies: Without guaranteed security, the willingness to invest in the European economy decreases.

Third, in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, a crisis of goal setting between the European members of NATO and the main force of NATO, the United States, is increasingly evident, which leaves unresolved the question of NATO's actual ability to defend its members in the face of major threats, such as Russia.

DEFENDING EUROPE WITHOUT THE U.S.?

The decisive factor pushing European capitals to search for new security formats has been a crisis of trust in the United States. Donald Trump's return to power in Washington in 2025 seriously alarmed Europeans. Known for his skepticism toward NATO, Trump has repeatedly indicated that allies must shoulder a larger share of the defense burden, and there are real fears in Europe that, at a critical moment, the Trump administration could refuse to defend allies and even strike a deal with the Kremlin at the expense of European partners. The U.S. decision to halt free aid to Ukraine and even cut some security funds for European countries bordering Russia has further fueled these fears. The concern that the United States under new leadership could leave Europe without its traditional shield has compelled EU leaders to dramatically scale up defense investments. At the NATO summit in The Hague in the summer of 2025, Europeans agreed on a target defense spending level of five percent of GDP, which was unthinkable until recently.

Although NATO is still declared the cornerstone of defense, Europe's capitals are no longer sure they can rely entirely on American security guarantees. Berlin and London concluded their pact precisely in the context of this new reality. Both countries seek to insure themselves against geopolitical turbulence, guided by cold calculation—realpolitik. For Chancellor Friedrich Merz's government, a bilateral alliance with Britain is a way to strengthen European deterrence autonomously from the United States. Britain, having gone through Brexit and a change of government, is seeking a new role in Europe, and demonstrating leadership in confronting Russia and readiness to defend a key partner increases its weight on the continent. As Merz himself emphasized, defense has become the red thread of the new treaty, reflecting the determination of the two countries to respond to the threats Europe faces together. London and Berlin are sending a signal to the U.S. and to their own societies: Even if the transatlantic bond weakens, they are ready to take on responsibility for security.

In return, they probably expect the United States to show greater respect for their interests—or at least attention. From their societies, the expectation is greater confidence and willingness to undertake ever-increasing defense spending and support ever-tightening policies.

The nuclear dimension deserves separate attention. Coordination among Europe's nuclear powers is intensifying. A week before the UK–Germany pact, Macron and Starmer agreed to synchronize the two countries' nuclear deterrence. In effect, Paris and London are starting to discuss a potential European nuclear shield for allies without direct U.S. involvement. Such close trilateral cooperation between France, the United Kingdom, and Germany seemed hard to achieve just a few years ago but has now emerged as a response to the cracks in the system of collective security. An informal E3 security triangle is taking shape: The three largest powers of Western Europe are assuming increasing responsibility for the continent's defense.

THE EMERGING "STRIPED MAP" OF EUROPEAN SECURITY?

The emergence of a bilateral pact between the UK and Germany is part of a broader trend to move beyond the traditional security architecture. European states are increasingly relying on ad hoc alliances and coalitions that go beyond the institutional frameworks of NATO and the EU. These formats are not a temporary phenomenon but the foundation on which a new security framework for Europe is being built. One

can speak of a multilayered system. The enduring global structures—NATO, with a reduced role for the United States, and EU defense cooperation—are complemented by a network of overlapping mini alliances among states on the continent.

Berlin, Paris, and London play a central role in the creation of this network of networks. By the summer of 2025, all three countries within the E3 either concluded or renewed special defense cooperation pacts. France and Germany signed the Aachen Treaty back in 2019, which provides for mutual assistance in the event of aggression and for close coordination of defense policies. France and the UK rely on long-standing partnerships like the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties and in 2025 announced new steps ranging from joint nuclear planning to establishing a separate coalition headquarters for assistance to Ukraine in Paris. Finally, the Kensington Treaty between the UK and Germany completed this configuration by formalizing mutual commitments between London and Berlin. As a result, Germany now has bilateral security guarantors in both of Europe's nuclear powers, and the UK has strong bilateral ties with the EU's two largest states.

Beyond this trio of leaders, other states are joining in, forming broader coalitions. The UK is not limiting itself to deals with Paris and Berlin and plans to conclude a similar defense treaty with Poland. In Warsaw in January 2025, Prime Minister Starmer announced the start of negotiations on a comprehensive pact with Poland that would cover joint action against Russia, combating hybrid threats, and the protection of energy infrastructure. Poland is a key ally on the eastern flank, and its bilateral ties with Britain will complement multilateral obligations under NATO. Similarly, other links are also emerging. The Nordic and Baltic countries coalesce around the UK–Nordic Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the Nordic states deepen integration through the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO), and in Eastern Europe partnerships are forming within the framework of the Bucharest Nine and other initiatives.

These overlapping formats create a kind of "striped map" or "spaghetti map" of Europe's security. States bind themselves with numerous issue-based agreements rather than waiting for unanimous approval from every ally in NATO. This approach also provides greater geopolitical maneuverability for key European countries in the defense sphere. New narrow alliances within the European framework of NATO can pursue their independent policies towards Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East

with much greater speed and efficiency. Such a clustered security system in Europe also leaves room for countries such as Moldova or Ukraine to join these new narrow defense alliances and obtain security guarantees outside NATO. This, in turn, could prove decisive for ending the Ukraine–Russia war by creating a new geopolitical balance and security guarantees without formal NATO participation or, conversely, for involving Western countries in the war by gradually drawing in first small European defense alliances like the one between the Germany, the UK, and France and then the rest of the alliance. Moreover, there are reasonable doubts about the effectiveness and real capabilities of these small coalitions.

This approach also entails certain risks of fragmentation. Not all European states are equally involved in the processes of decision-making. "Coalitions of the willing," by definition, exclude those whose positions diverge from the core, which can heighten the sense of peripherality among some allies. For instance, Southern European states or smaller EU countries may fear that key decisions are now being taken by a narrow group of leaders without their participation. And as a result, this leads to a further loss of trust within the alliance and a general weakening of NATO.

THE PRICE OF EXCLUSIVITY

The emergence of exclusive pacts like the London–Berlin alliance inevitably raises the question of NATO's role in the new environment. On the one hand, European leaders stress that bilateral arrangements are not directed against NATO but instead strengthen Europe's contribution to collective defense. The new treaty contains an explicit clause affirming fidelity to NATO as the basis of joint security. Stronger ties between key members may well increase NATO's coordination and military capabilities. These initiatives can also relieve part of the burden on the United States, precisely what Washington had long urged Europe to do. In this sense, Europe is demonstrating its readiness to provide its own backstop.

On the other hand, the conspicuous conclusion of a separate defense alliance is a sign of a crisis of trust in the NATO umbrella. Previously, such bilateral treaties were seen as superfluous within the alliance. Now, they are perceived as a necessary guarantee in case NATO's mechanisms fail. In political circles, an unvoiced concern is increasingly apparent: What if one of the allies refuses to apply Article 5? Mutual guarantees between the UK and Germany can be a reserve option in the event of a

political crisis in NATO or a paralysis of its procedures. For the first time since the Cold War, Europeans have allowed for the possibility that collective defense may not function as designed, and they are taking measures based on a worst-case scenario.

It is likely that even the parties of the Kensington Treaty themselves cannot fully predict its consequences but are trying to ensure themselves a wider field for maneuvering in the security sphere and send signals to both external and internal observers. Maybe it is the draft of an actual additional security contour within the European NATO, which these countries can consider their main security structure. That is why this net of agreements has a stable trilateral character including France, and resources are allocated for their implementation. The planned ratification of the agreement in parliament, which would give it the weight of a full, long-term mutual commitment, also shows that Germany and Britain take this agreement seriously enough.

However, in the event of a real security crisis on NATO's eastern flank, what guarantees that the efforts of these three states to protect Poland or the Baltic countries will be real military efforts and not merely advising or imitation? After all, the participants in the agreements could retreat to the borders of the Franco–German–British agreements. This happened in Europe during World War II when, despite the security guarantees that Poland received from Britain and France, these countries did not begin real military operations after the start of the German invasion, and British troops appeared on mainland Europe only to protect France.

Another important question is how the new formats will affect Europe's unity. If E3 initiatives start moving beyond consensus—frictions will emerge within NATO and the EU. States outside the tight circle may not fully trust its leaders' intentions. European history has seen great powers conclude separate deals before, and smaller states seek to avoid any repetition. For this reason, it is important for the UK, Germany, and France to promptly communicate that their initiatives aim to strengthen common security, not to create spheres of influence. Therefore, many NATO members, including Hungary, advocate for strengthening internal consensus and developing the NATO structures themselves, instead of creating fragmentation and pushing the situational will of the largest countries.

For the foreseeable future, European security will be shaped by a combination of the state of relations between the United States and its European allies and the unity of purposes within NATO. The NATO alliance will likely remain the key forum for defense planning; however, its effectiveness will largely depend on the political will of the United States and consensus within the European part of the bloc. If the transatlantic rift deepens, cluster coalitions of European states will come to the fore, whether they want it now or not. The pact between the UK and Germany is a precedent for allies preparing an emergency exit in the case of possible turbulence. Even they are trying to puff themself up. By strengthening bilateral commitments, they create reserve security positions and try to increase pressure on individual rebellious members of the alliance by signaling the lack of real protection. They also attract the attention of the United States by demonstrating that if the U.S. does not participate in NATO's defense on the eastern flank despite the fact that most post-Soviet countries on the flank are oriented primarily towards America, they can avoid engagement too.

The "end of history" has given way to great power rivalry and competing security blocs. In these conditions, the European security space continues to be a field of complex internal competition, driven by self-interests that threaten internal unity, with the active role of the United States. The bilateral alliance between London and Berlin is just one manifestation of this process, marking an attempt by key European states to ensure their security given the scarcity of resources and test the reactions of others. Europe has acted in similar ways before. Every time the continent faces serious threats—be it wars or epidemics—the temptation to solve its problems within narrow circles of states increases. Ultimately, the viability of this paradigm depends on the ability of European allies to truly act together and take responsibility not only for war, but also for peace.