Germany is ready to lead. The question is: What kind of leadership are we talking about? Do we all share the same idea of leadership? A word that in German has such a different connotation than in English?

German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen, February 2015

Whatever is decided in the Kremlin, we will move forward, and Europe will move forward. That’s why we will continue America’s strength and leadership. That’s why we encourage Germany’s efforts to lead on security. And that’s why we’re working so hard to assure NATO’s capabilities and unity.

Ashton Carter, United States Secretary of Defense, June 2015

Economically strong and politically stable, Germany has emerged as Europe’s pivotal power. As the West struggles with the consequences of the financial crisis, and turmoil in Europe’s neighbourhood puts the established institutional framework under unprecedented pressure, partners and allies rely increasingly on Berlin to take action. Until recently, calls for German leadership and debates about German hegemony have focused mostly on the country’s role as a geo-economic power, with Berlin’s performance as a security actor usually playing a more minor role. Over the past five years, however, this emphasis has shifted. In a changing security environment, in which Europe is forced to take a bigger share of the transatlantic burden, Germany’s responsibility for the continent’s security has become an issue of greater urgency. At the Munich Security Conference in 2014 the coalition government led by Angela Merkel signalled a more active and engaged foreign policy that did not exclude military action. Given its record of military reticence, however, doubts remain. Can Germany really lead on security?

This article sets about addressing the question by looking at recent German contributions to European defence cooperation. In 2013 Germany introduced the Framework Nations Concept (FNC) as a systematic and structured approach to joint capability development. Responding to the need to do more with less in

2 Ashton Carter, remarks at Atlantik-Brücke on the occasion of his first official visit to Germany, ‘US, Germany, and NATO are moving forward together’, Berlin, 22 June 2015.
times of shrinking defence budgets, the initiative aimed at filling capability gaps identified by NATO’s Defence and Planning Process (NDPP). The concept relies on the idea that a bigger partner—the framework nation—takes overall responsibility for coordinating the contributions of smaller partners, i.e. nations unable to maintain a broad capability profile. In addition, the framework nation contributes key capabilities to the cluster. Germany not only confirmed its readiness to take on the role of framework nation for one or several clusters, it also took overall responsibility for developing the concept further. Germany thus became the framework nation for the FNC, a job description that corresponded with Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s notion of his country’s role as ‘Europe’s Chief Facilitating Officer’.4

I will argue here that Germany’s preference for the framework nation model can be interpreted as an effort to avoid and circumvent an unwanted debate on leadership and hegemony. The model builds on the premise that bigger partners have a particular responsibility to coordinate and facilitate while emphasizing the notion of partnership and shared leadership. I argue further that the FNC initiative reflects Germany’s particular approach to multinational defence cooperation, which is characterized by a strong commitment to deeper integration on the one hand and a pragmatic attitude towards the variability and complementarity of formats on the other.

The analysis focuses on two questions that have been central to these debates. First: does the FNC initiative signal a change in Germany’s willingness to take a lead on security, and how credible is Germany in this role? The second question concerns the concept itself: does the framework nation model provide an answer to Europe’s defence cooperation and what is its added value compared to similar concepts? In the light of the Ukraine crisis and the renewed focus on collective defence,5 Germany’s general willingness to be a more active and responsible security partner and the proposal of a concept intended to strengthen European defence have become even more relevant. At the same time, the crisis made it more urgent for Germany to adapt the concept and to demonstrate its reliability as a military partner.

I will start by examining how Germany embraced the framework nation model as way to take leadership responsibility in security policy. I will then go on to discuss reactions to the proposal of 2013 and weigh different concerns, some of which relate in part to the concept as a model for defence cooperation and in part to Germany’s reliability as an ally and credibility as a leader. In the third section I will ask how changes in the security environment since 2014 have affected Germany’s role in European security in general and the FNC initiative in particular. The concluding section discusses the FNC initiative as a reflection of Germany’s

4 Frank-Walter Steinmeier, ‘Maintaining transatlantic unity in a complex world’, speech at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington DC, 12 March 2015.
increased willingness to take leadership responsibility as an international actor and as part of a broader trend towards more flexible and pragmatic cooperation in defence and security policy.

**Germany and the concept of framework nation**

The news of a new German initiative entitled the Framework Nations Concept was first announced accidentally at a NATO meeting in June 2013.6 At the time no proper proposal existed on paper, and several weeks passed before the Ministry of Defence could send a ‘food for thought’ paper to NATO’s Secretary-General, who prepared it for discussion at the next defence ministers’ meeting in October.7 In the meantime allies and experts wondered if the initiative’s name, which added just one letter to the already widely used term ‘framework nation’, signified a substantially new contribution to the ongoing debate on multinational defence cooperation.

Despite this bumpy start, neither the timing nor the terminology was accidental. The initiative’s main intention was to address the urgent need for closer European defence cooperation. Defence spending in Europe had been in a downward spiral for years, a situation further exacerbated from 2009 onwards by the financial crisis, which led to deep and mostly uncoordinated cuts. Military interventions in Libya (2011) and Mali (2013) had underlined the shortfalls in European capabilities and demonstrated the dependency on the United States at a time when Washington was demanding more insistently than ever that burdens be shared more equitably. To be sure, initiatives for closer cooperation were under way. The EU-led ‘Pooling and Sharing’ concept of 2010 and NATO’s ‘Smart Defence’ initiative of 2012 offered member states a set of tools to generate modern defence capabilities in a more cost-efficient, effective and coherent way. But member states remained hesitant about committing themselves to multilateral projects, preferring to rely instead on national reform processes and bilateral agreements. In line with its traditionally pro-integration stance, Germany proposed and participated in many initiatives for closer defence cooperation. However, the need to uphold its particular culture of military restraint kept German decision-makers from pushing too hard for steps that would restrict national authority on military matters.8 As a result, Berlin also pursued its own defence reform, with limited coordination of cuts and procurements with NATO’s international staff or the EU and its European Defence Agency (EDA).

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In addition to being a necessary boost for European defence cooperation, launching an initiative in NATO was a useful way of proving Germany’s commitment to the alliance. Rebuilding trust was high on the agenda following the Libyan crisis, during which Germany’s reliability as an ally and military partner had been severely questioned. The more precise timing was important with regard to two cycles. First, one year after NATO’s Chicago summit in 2012, new initiatives had to be launched in time to become deliverable for the alliance’s next gathering in Wales. Second, in the German context, where 2013 was an election year, the FNC proposal came just in time to become part of the negotiations for a new coalition agreement and to receive the political backing of the new government.

As for terminology, the naming of the initiative was inspired by Germany’s experiences in Afghanistan, where the Bundeswehr had taken the role of a lead nation, first in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Kabul and later for two provincial reconstruction teams and the Regional Command North.9 In an ISAF context, lead or framework nations were in charge of coordinating all civil and military activities in one geographic area and also provided a large proportion of the troops and enabling capacities. As an organizational model for operational command structures, lead and framework nation concepts had been around for a long time. As Ruiz Palmer observes, ‘framework nation arrangements were an indispensable component of NATO’ already during the Cold War.10 As a new post-Cold War security order emerged, however, they were not restricted to the alliance.

There existed several specific definitions of the terms, but in practice they were often used synonymously. Since the mid-1990s framework and lead nation models were used whenever nations preferred a more flexible organization over the integration model that was used for NATO’s joint capacities (the AWACS surveillance planes and the standing maritime units).11 New crises in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa called for the rapid deployment of a coalition, and under a lead or framework nation model one nation could be designated to provide a national headquarters as well as key capabilities while other contributing nations retained control over their own forces. At the beginning of the 1990s, the EU had charged the Western European Union (WEU) to engage in crisis management operations on its behalf. Since the establishment of autonomous capabilities and command structures proved too controversial, Europeans had to rely on NATO capabilities for military action. But in 1997 the WEU agreed on a concept that would facilitate autonomous military action in extreme situations with recourse to the national command structures of a framework nation.12 In 2002, following the emergence

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9 Germany’s performance as a lead nation for reforming the Afghan police sector is widely regarded as poor, partly because, like other lead nations, it failed to commit sufficient resources, but also because the model itself proved inadequate, lacking sufficient coordination. See German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Assessment of the engagement in Afghanistan written by Dr Michael Koch, Special Representative of the Federal Government for Afghanistan and Pakistan, annex to Federal Government, progress report on Afghanistan (Berlin, 2014), p. 52.
of its European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), the EU adopted its own Framework Nation Concept as a ‘conceptual basis for the conduct of autonomous EU-led CMOs [Crisis Management Operations] with recourse to a Framework Nation’.  

Operation Artemis in 2003 was the first ESDP operation in which the concept was used. This French-led intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo also became the principal organizational model for the EU battlegroup concept launched a year later. 14 Operation Artemis demonstrated that France, with its tradition of force projection, its interests in Africa and its ambiguity towards NATO, was the typical framework nation in an EU context. Germany, by contrast, remained reluctant to take a lead nation responsibility for crisis management operations in Africa, and when it eventually agreed to assume this role in 2006, commentators warned that an ‘overstretched and inexperienced German lead nation can do more harm than good’. 15 In principle, Germany had as early as the late 1990s agreed to be one of the western states declaring themselves willing and able to act as lead nation, even for a coalition. 16 In a NATO context, Germany started assuming leadership responsibility for stabilization missions in Macedonia and Kosovo. According to the then Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping of the Social Democratic Party (SPD):  

[The] fact that we now for the first time take responsibility as a ‘Lead Nation’ in Kosovo— together and on the same level as the Americans, the British, the French, and the Italians, signals that we have arrived in Europe with the full responsibility and all the possibilities that result from it. 17  

It was the war in Afghanistan, however, that turned into the first major test for German military leadership. It is well known to what extent this conflict demonstrated Germany’s limitations as a military actor, mainly due to domestic restrictions and the political elite’s failure to accept the realities on the ground. 18  

However, that experience as a lead nation in ISAF forced Germany’s political and military leadership to reflect on the ambitions and consequences associated

13 The concept was first adopted on 25 July 2002 as COSDP 247: see Council of the European Union, EU Framework Nation Concept, COSDP 968 (Brussels, 22 Nov. 2010) at p. 5.  
15 Ludger Schadomsky, ‘Is Germany fit to lead peacekeepers in Congo?’, Deutsche Welle, 25 March 2006, http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-is-germany-fit-to-lead-peacekeepers-in-congo/a-1944083. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 5 July 2016.) On different positions inside the government on whether Germany should take a lead role or not, see Klaus Brummer, Die Innenpolitik der Außenpolitik (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013), pp. 69–103.  
16 In 1996 Germany was a founding member of the Multinational Interoperability Council and thus one of six western nations willing and (in principle) able to lead a coalition in military operations. In 2000 one of the Council’s working groups stated that ‘the Lead Nation is that nation with the will and capability, competence, and influence to provide the essential elements of political consultation and military leadership to coordinate the planning, mounting, and execution of a coalition military operation’. See Multinational Interoperability Working Group, The lead nation concept in coalition operations, 20 Dec. 2000.  
17 Scharping, quoted in Walter Spindler, ‘Der Beitrag der Bundeswehr zur Bewältigung des Kosovo-Konflikts’, in Erich Reiter, ed., Jahrbuch für internationale Sicherheitspolitik 2000 (Hamburg: Mittler, 2000). (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German texts are by the author.)  
with this role. At the beginning of the 2010s, these experiences and reflections were gradually included in the principal strategic documents.\textsuperscript{19} The Defence Policy Guidelines issued in 2011 listed two tasks as the national level of ambition: ‘the option of assuming command responsibility as a framework nation and providing the required capabilities for the entire task spectrum, into which contributions of other nations can be integrated in a flexible and synergetic manner.’\textsuperscript{20} Then, in July 2013, the ‘Conception of the Bundeswehr’ confirmed Germany’s ‘goal to assure the option of taking responsibility as a framework nation in NATO and the EU’.\textsuperscript{21} Accepting the status of framework nation for military operations coincided with the political debate about German leadership referred to above.

During the financial crisis from 2009 onwards it became evident that Germany’s status as Europe’s leading economic power also translated into political influence. Poland’s Foreign Minister famously declared that he feared ‘Germany’s power less than her inactivity’, and analysts noted that the ‘new German question’ was whether Europe would get the Germany it needed.\textsuperscript{22} At the Munich Security Conference in 2012, the topic for the opening panel was ‘Germany’s responsibility in the world’—a question that, according to Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière, would have represented a breach of a taboo not so long ago.\textsuperscript{23} Faced with growing expectations, German leaders seemed to recognize the need for a more open debate on Germany’s role in international affairs and its contribution to Euro-Atlantic security. Security experts from the governing Christian Democratic Party (CDU) called for a new impetus to reinvigorate defence cooperation in Europe and proposed that Germany serve as an Anlehnungspartner (a partner to lean on) for nations that were unable to maintain the entire spectrum of capabilities.\textsuperscript{24} Chancellor Merkel supported this concept as a possible way to make progress with ‘Pooling and Sharing’ initiatives, and experts linked the idea of an Anlehnungspartner to the understanding of Germany as a framework nation as defined in the Defence Policy Guidelines of 2011.\textsuperscript{25}

It was the Ministry of Defence that eventually tabled a concrete proposal, and de Maizière deliberately chose to present it in NATO. The originality of the FNC

\textsuperscript{19} As Martin Zapfe points out, the adaptation to a new strategic reality did not come easily, inhibited by the well-established culture of military restraint: ‘The functional pressure of an increased enemy threat on the ground to adapt stood against cultural constraints inhibiting adaptation; this evolved into a bottom-up versus top-down dynamic’; Martin Zapfe, ‘Strategic culture shaping allied integration: the Bundeswehr and joint operational doctrine’, \textit{Journal of Strategic Studies} 39: 2, 2016, p. 254.


\textsuperscript{21} German Ministry of Defence, \textit{Konzeption der Bundeswehr} (Berlin, 2013), p. 6. The document outlining the shape of the reformed Bundeswehr also referred to the guidance of 2011, emphasizing that the ambition to function as a framework nation meant that Germany ‘had to provide capabilities for the entire force spectrum to which other nations could contribute their contributions in a flexible manner’: German Ministry of Defence, \textit{Neuausrichtung der Bundeswehr} (Berlin, 2013), p. 11.


initiative is the application of the framework nation model to multinational defence planning. In a fashion similar to the need for organizational models that allowed for rapid deployment of troops, defence planning needed tailor-made formats in which groups of nations were able to join forces and intensify their cooperation. In both cases, lead or framework nations were assigned the role of drivers and facilitators. Precisely because it addressed the pressing challenges to European defence and because it signalled Germany’s readiness to engage more in military cooperation, the concept was generally welcomed.26 However, from the start the initiative also met with sceptical reactions, of which some were directed against the concept’s purpose and design and others against the role of Germany. Broadly, these concerns can be grouped in three categories: those regarding cohesion, that is, the concept’s place in the institutional framework and its relation to existing initiatives; those concerning the concept itself, in particular the relationship and dependency between framework and supporting nations; and finally concerns about Germany’s reliability as a military partner.

A concept to reform European defence cooperation?

Reporting on the meeting in October 2013 at which the FNC was launched, the news magazine Der Spiegel wrote of a ‘German plan to reform NATO’.27 According to experts, Germany had indeed proposed a model ‘with the potential of attacking the problems of European defence at their root’.28 Arguably the German Ministry of Defence’s ambition in launching the initiative was much lower. The proposal was deliberately developed in cooperation with NATO in order to link it to a concrete list of capability gaps as identified by the alliance’s planning process, the NDPP. Moreover, decision-makers in Berlin were careful to avoid the impression that Germany wanted to press a major reform scheme on its partners and allies. Nevertheless, the initiative raised questions—at home and abroad—about the concept’s place in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, that is, how it would be linked to other projects for capability development within and outside the institutional framework of NATO and the EU. On a more general level, commentators wondered whether the FNC would contribute further to a trend towards capability development evolving in clusters among member states instead of being coordinated by the EU and NATO.29

Before addressing the reactions of Germany’s allies to the proposal, it is important to note a particular facet of the German discussion: namely, questions

26 ‘NATO/ministerial: Germany tables new framework nation concept’, p. 2.
concerning how the concept related to the EU. Parliamentarians and commentators wanted to know why the FNC was being launched in NATO and not as an EU initiative, how projects developed by FNC clusters would be coordinated with the EU-initiated Pooling and Sharing mechanism, and whether the concept was applicable in an EU context as well. To understand this discussion one has to remember that the German discourse on European security is based on two main principles: the logic of European integration, with the long-term goal of a European army, and the complementarity of the EU and NATO. Both principles are key elements of virtually every German speech and statement on European defence cooperation, and they are reflected in major documents such as coalition agreements and white papers. The electorate shows little interest in these issues, but there is broad political and societal support to advance European defence integration, and parliamentarians call regularly for better and more cooperation and enquire about the status of a variety of defence initiatives. Also, German analysts keep insisting that there is no alternative to closer integration and emphasizing the need for more coherence between initiatives launched in NATO and in the EU.

The government’s reaction to these calls might appear ambivalent but in fact follows a fairly consistent logic that seems to be shared, or at least accepted, across party divisions. On the one hand, Germany’s political elite supports steps towards an ever more integrated defence sector as part of the long-term goal of a European army. When Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called in March 2015 for a European army, German politicians, led by the Minister of Defence, were among the few to applaud. At the same time, there is a common understanding that integrated European forces can only be achieved in a step-by-step approach, and German governments display a great deal of pragmatism with regard to concrete proposals for cooperation. In response to a request by the opposition in April 2013, the government pointed out that the Basic Law allows Germany’s participation in ‘a step-by-step development towards the establishment of a European army’ but emphasized that the deployment of German forces would remain under the constitutional authority of the Bundestag. Moreover, German decision-makers see no use in launching proposals that risk putting off partners more reluctant to envisage further integration. Located at the heart of Europe and with armed forces that can only be deployed multilaterally, Germany more than any other European country depends on engaging as many partners as possible. This also

30 The United Nations and the OSCE are the other two pillars of German security policy, but they play only minor roles in European security and defence cooperation.
31 Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 17/7360, Gemeinsame Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik (GSVP) weiterentwickeln und mitgestalten (Berlin, 19 Oct. 2011); Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 17/9096, Initiativen der Bundesregierung zur Zusammenlegung und gemeinsamen Nutzung (Pooling and Sharing) militärischer Fähigkeiten auf Ebene der Europäischen Union (Berlin, 16 April 2012); Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 17/13254, Bundeswehr: Einsatzarmee im Wandel (Berlin, 24 April 2013).
34 Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 17/13254, Bundeswehr, p. 12.
explains why proposals for more European integration are usually balanced with initiatives to strengthen NATO and the transatlantic relationship. Typically, Ursula von der Leyen called the FNC ‘a European answer to a European problem’ that ‘has the potential to strengthen both NATO and the EU’.

Germany also remains committed to projects initiated in the framework of NATO’s Smart Defence initiative and the EU’s Pooling and Sharing programme. Last but not least, despite the limited likelihood of success, the administration keeps on looking for possibilities to revive the EU concept of Permanent Structured Coordination (PESCO) and to combine different NATO and EU initiatives as well as the ‘intricate network of bilateral and multilateral relations’ among member states under the roof of a ‘common European Security and Defence Union’.

In the short term, however, German decision-makers had to realize that their allies were more preoccupied with the question of how much flexibility the proposed clusters would have within the framework of NATO and what their added value would be compared to existing ‘smart defence’ projects and other bi- or minilateral set-ups for defence cooperation. The FNC was originally conceived as a top-down approach. Countering the trend of uncoordinated national defence reforms and bilateral or regional agreements, the FNC would look to the NDPP for orientation. It soon became clear, however, that member states wished to have more flexibility in proposing projects and choosing partners, making the concept essentially bottom-up. Following the initial phase, nations took control and would brief NATO only irregularly about progress. While loosening up the original idea about a strong link to the NDPP made the concept more attractive to member states, it meant that the FNC had to face the same concern that many expressed towards cooperation in clusters in general: would it really advance defence cooperation or would it undermine efforts to create more coherent defence architecture? Some fear the latter and warned that ‘patchy multilateralism’ would lead to a less coherent, multi-speed Europe. Others insist that clusters are ‘not the enemy’, but rather a chance to overcome stagnation in European security cooperation through more dynamic and tailor-made formats.

37 As of Jan. 2015 Germany participated in 18 of 20 Pooling and Sharing projects coordinated within the EU framework by the EDA. Within the Smart Defence initiative, Germany had the lead or co-lead in three projects and participated in 11 more. See Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 18/3884, Neue Initiative zur europäischen Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik (Berlin, 29 Jan. 2015), p. 4.
38 German Ministry of Defence, White paper on German security policy and the future of the Bundeswehr (Berlin 2016), p. 73. Author’s interview with officials at the German Ministry of Defence, June 2015.
39 Minilateral here means cooperation in small groups, formats or clusters. For more on the concept see http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/23/on-minilateralism/ and http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/minilateralism.
40 ‘NATO/ministerial: Germany tables new framework nation concept’, p. 2.
41 Telephone interview with senior official at NATO HQ, May 2015; see also ‘NATO/ ministerial: NATO takes on German Framework Nation Concept’, EDD, no. 681, 4 March 2014, p. 4.
According to Britain’s then Defence Minister Philip Hammond, the FNC, like other initiatives such as the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) or the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), had ‘the potential to sidestep some of the delays that we have had in NATO processes in the past’.44 As a result, the FNC developed in line with NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s assessment, namely as ‘one of several avenues to ensure that we can acquire the necessary military capabilities in the future’.45

A second issue of general concern among allies was dependency. To what extent would participation in a cluster make smaller partners dependent on the framework nation? For some countries it was essential that joining a cluster did not exclude participation in other initiatives. Others were preoccupied with the questions of individual country access to capacities developed in common, and of the availability of multinational capabilities developed by a group of allies. What would happen if one or several members decided to participate in a joint operation and others decided not to take part because they disagreed with the purpose or the legitimacy of the venture? Would the latter be able to block the use of jointly developed capabilities or the deployment of jointly trained troops? Others again were worried about specialization. Would participation in the FNC force allies to give up certain capabilities without ensuring that others could compensate? Would it lead to overspecialization, that is, ‘to a kind of specialisation which could be dangerous if some nations specialise only in certain types of mission and disengage from other missions’?46 These concerns were particularly relevant for the supporting nation’s defence industry. As the clusters would mainly enhance cooperation on capability development, how would the participating countries deal with defence contracts? Could smaller nations risk losing their position vis-à-vis the framework nation? Few went so far as to suggest that Germany had launched the initiative in order to dominate its partners, but it was evident that the FNC would help bigger partners to sustain their concept of breadth before depth.47 From a German point of view, all allies will benefit from streamlining the European defence industry according to the principle of division of labour. As supporting partners are meant to provide niche capabilities and specialization, joining one or more FNC clusters might help them to reform and restructure their defence industrial sectors.

To underline the concept’s flexibility and to avoid the impression of German dominance, the Berlin government insisted that under the framework nation

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46 Allied diplomat quoted in Croft and Siebold, ‘Germany proposes plan’; ‘NATO/ministerial: Germany tables new framework nation concept’, p. 2.

47 Justyna Gotkowska, ‘Germany’s idea of a European army’, OSW Analyses (Warsaw, 25 March 2015), http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-03-25/germanys-idea-a-european-army. The German ‘food for thought’ paper of Sept. 2013 acknowledged that in order to ‘fully meet the capability targets asked for by the Alliance’ even bigger nations needed to have their ‘profile … complemented and their sustainability … improved by capabilities that would need to be provided by other nations’.

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model, each member would retain sovereign command authority over its armed forces. It was also pointed out that Germany would act both as a framework nation and as a supporting nation. In practice, however, only a few nations were qualified to lead a cluster and Germany’s centrality to the project could not be denied. On the one hand, German officials were reluctant to identify areas in which they would specialize since this would question the principle of breadth before depth and undermine the country’s status as a major power. On the other hand, few other partners were ready to step up as framework nations. Britain and later also France supported the FNC but were preoccupied with their own initiatives and showed little interest in taking responsibility for a German-led group. Smaller allies saw themselves in the role of supporting nations and were looking to Germany for leadership. This presented German defence officials with a dilemma. Initially, they were confident that they would be able to manage even a large group of allies; however, as the number of participating countries grew, one of the concept’s main goals, namely to improve allied capability development through the creation of coherent clusters, came under threat. Experts recommended that ‘clusters should remain relatively small in terms of the number of partners’ in order to maintain their added value. There was little doubt about the German Defence Ministry’s dedication to establishing the best possible system, but in addition to the proposed structure’s complexity, typical German Gründlichkeit (thoroughness) slowed down the process and made allies and NATO officials increasingly impatient.

A third issue of concern and an essential precondition for the workability of deeper defence cooperation is reliability and trust. As the late Alyson Bailes noted, ‘any role division between states demands absolute faith in the side taking the other role, so that they can always be counted on to supply what we lack in a crisis’. Clusters would be put together among countries that trusted each other, and joining forces in a cluster would deepen relations further and create more trust. However, as Bailes also noted, ‘[that] level of trust is hard to find even among European nations that have worked together in the EU and NATO for years’. To generate this degree of confidence requires reliability, especially from the framework nation. For many allies, concerns about dependency and trust were directly linked to the role of national parliaments. They worried that ‘a cluster system could make it more difficult for NATO to use forces on operations because a parliament in one country could effectively veto military action by other nations in the cluster’. Such concerns were particularly pertinent in the case of Germany. The concept’s initiator and main promoter had not only volunteered as the framework nation for several of the clusters—it was also the member state in which the parliament had at its disposal particularly comprehensive rights. As Der Spiegel noted:

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49 Drent et al., Defence cooperation in clusters, p. 15 (emphasis in original).
51 Bailes, ‘Defense specialisation’.
52 Croft and Siebold, ‘Germany proposes plan’.
Even countries that welcome the German proposals, including the United States and the United Kingdom, are pushing the question of how smaller member states, which lack certain military capabilities, can rely on Germany’s solidarity if joint missions abroad must be approved every time by the Bundestag.53

Through its engagements in military missions concerning the Balkans, in Afghanistan and in Africa, Germany had proved itself willing and able to participate in military missions and even to take the role of a lead nation. Documents like the Konzeption of 2013 not only manifested the willingness to lead but also acknowledged that ‘engaging in tasks preparing for or taking part in operations in a joint and shared way necessarily leads to mutual dependencies and commitments’.54 Yet the experience of the Bundeswehr’s participation in NATO- and EU-led operations also remained deeply problematic, because the mandates passed by the Bundestag usually included numerous restrictions on the numbers of troops deployed, the geographical area in which they were able to operate and the types of tasks in which they were allowed to engage. The withdrawal of personnel from NATO’s integrated forces during the Libya intervention, albeit temporarily, highlighted the problem of Bundeswehr officers in multinational structures and severely damaged Germany’s reputation as a reliable ally. A commission established in early 2014 to review the German deployment law noted that:

The Framework Nations Concept introduced by Germany has drawn greater attention to the discussion about progressive Alliance integration within NATO and the EU. This is associated with the question of how the tried-and-tested instrument of constitutive parliamentary participation in decisions about the deployment of German armed forces can be safeguarded within the current parameters.55

The proposal itself was seen as a ‘silver lining’, signalling a German ‘recommitment to the alliance’. Still some allies feared that ‘if the German Framework Nations Concept is implemented to the full extent, the smaller partners from the German “cluster” may in the long run become militarily, and thus politically, dependent on Germany’s political and military decisions.’56

The government denied that the FNC had anything to do with the parliamentary reservation clause and insisted that Germany would stand by its security commitments.57 However, to overcome the scepticism of its allies, Germany had to work along three lines: it had to prove its commitment to the concept; it had to develop the concept further in order to make it more flexible; and, finally, it had to establish trust by proving its reliability. Major changes in European and international security during 2014 put Germany’s willingness to lead on security

53 Gebauer et al., ‘NATO reform’.
54 German Ministry of Defence, Konzeption der Bundeswehr, p. 6.
to an unexpected test and resulted in the FNC’s becoming one of several concrete contributions to strengthening the alliance.

Adapting to a changing security situation

At the beginning of 2014 Germany had managed to overcome some of the scepticism, and the work of putting the clusters together was well under way. Critically, the concept had gained political support from the new government. Despite some hesitation on the part of the Social Democrats, who feared that a focus on cooperation in clusters might compromise the commitment to more integration, the FNC was included in the coalition agreement with the Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party (CDU/CSU). Mentioning the concept in her speech at the Munich Security Conference of 2014, the new Defence Minister made it part of the government’s commitment to a new and more active German foreign and security policy. For many observers, the FNC had become one of the concrete signs that the coalition might be serious about its promise to take ‘more responsibility’. In the meantime, German officials had been tireless in organizing bilateral meetings with potential partners to convince them of the concept’s advantages, and had also attempted to make it less rigid. Even France, the most sceptical of all allies, had become more positive, although it did not see a prominent role for itself in the arrangement. To be sure, the clusters were still a long way from the point of formal agreements being concluded, and concerns about accessibility and availability were not yet solved. Allies agreed, however, to address these concerns on a case-by-case basis and to officially endorse the concept during the NATO summit in Wales.

Just a few weeks later, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the ensuing deterioration of relations between Moscow and European capitals dramatically changed the continental security environment. At first the Ukraine crisis became a platform on which Germany could exert leadership in line with its preferred approach to foreign policy and crisis management. Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Steinmeier won praise for their efforts to solve the crisis by diplomatic means through negotiation and mediation in bi- and minilateral formats as well as through the EU. They were clear about their intention to avoid any escalation of the conflict and firmly excluded a military solution. As a consequence, the Germans were sceptical about the idea of responding to Russia’s aggressive actions in Ukraine with countermeasures in NATO. In order to remain in line

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61 EDD, no. 681, 4 March 2014, p. 4.
with the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act, Berlin blocked proposals to station NATO forces permanently in the new member states. During the summer of 2014, however, Merkel and Steinmeier became increasingly frustrated with Putin’s intransigence and the continued Russian support for the rebels in eastern Ukraine that kept the war alive. The downing of Malaysia Airlines passenger flight MH17 on 17 July 2014, allegedly by the hand of the separatists, turned the public mood in Germany in favour of more firmness towards Russia. As a result, German decision-makers felt the need to prove Berlin’s reliability as a European power that takes seriously the concerns of smaller allies, and in particular those of the new members in eastern Europe. Referring to allied concerns, the government emphasized Germany’s prominent participation in efforts to strengthen NATO’s presence in the Baltic region. Merkel’s visit to Riga ahead of the Wales summit added a political dimension to these moves and was interpreted in Poland and the Baltic countries as an important and long overdue signal of solidarity.63

Arguably Germany’s most prominent contribution to NATO’s adaptation measures in response to Russian actions in Ukraine were the decision to reinforce the operational readiness of the Multinational Corps North East (MNCNE) in Szczecin (Poland) and the commitment to take up the role of a framework nation for NATO’s new spearhead force. Both contributions were an extension of existing commitments. Together with Poland and Denmark, Germany had been the MNCNE’s framework nation since the end of the 1990s, and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) was to be based on capabilities committed by allies to the NATO Response Force (NRF) established in 2003. In 2015, Germany, together with the Netherlands, Norway and other nations participating in the First German/Netherlands Corps, was already preparing to be the standby force for the NRF in 2015. However, raising the alliance’s readiness called for considerable investments in personnel, capabilities and funding, and the combination of these efforts was meant to send an important signal of reassurance to partners in eastern Europe. Moreover, by taking the responsibility as a framework nation for two key measures under NATO’s Readiness Action Plan (RAP), Germany demonstrated that it was serious about its promise to adopt a more active foreign and security policy. Confirming Germany’s willingness to be one of the VJTF framework nations in the future as well, Defence Minister von der Leyen reportedly told NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg that it was ‘payback time’: her country had for decades relied on the support of allies and now wanted to give something back.64

In addition to showing resolve and solidarity, however, engaging in various reassurance and adaptation measures also gave Germany an opportunity to shape the alliance’s response in a situation of conflicting interests. By actively contributing to the RAP’s core measures—the VJTF, the reinforced MNCNE, and the

newly established NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs)\textsuperscript{65}—Germany was able to tone down calls from east European states for a permanent presence of NATO troops on their soil. Crucial to this approach was the support of the United States. The Obama administration had reacted to Russia’s threatening behaviour by unilaterally deploying troops and pre-positioning material in eastern Europe. Visiting the Baltic countries ahead of the Wales summit, President Obama underlined America’s solidarity with the announcement of a US$1 billion grant to be spent on the region’s security—a sum that has been quadrupled in the following years.\textsuperscript{66} These measures, collectively referred to as the European Reassurance Initiative, do not change the administration’s intention to urge Europeans to take more responsibility themselves. Even though groups in Congress argued for an even more active US involvement and supported Poland’s and the Baltic countries’ appeals for a permanent stationing of NATO troops, the US government accepted the allied consensus on a persistent rotational force presence. Rather than taking a leading role itself, Washington encouraged the Germans to go ahead and supported initiatives like the FNC and the VJTF with critical enablers. Measures to enhance resilience, preparedness and interoperability in eastern Europe included bilateral schemes such as the Transatlantic Capability Enhancement and Training Initiative (TACET) launched in June 2015.\textsuperscript{67} Over the following months Britain joined Germany and the United States as a TACET lead nation, and at the defence ministerial meeting in February 2016, 15 allies agreed to make TACET a ‘tangible contribution to the full implementation of the NATO Readiness Action Plan’.\textsuperscript{68}

From a German point of view, American support and involvement give crucial legitimacy to the FNC and related initiatives, thus helping to overcome the scepticism of some east European partners. During the summer of 2014, when faced with a changing security situation policy-makers and officials at the German Ministry of Defence had to consider three options for the FNC. One option was to adapt the concept in such a way as to emphasize its relevance to NATO reassurance measures. Having launched the concept as a major German initiative within NATO, it seemed wrong to continue promoting it as solely a medium- and long-term initiative in the hands of the planners. Another option was to continue work on the concept as a long-term contribution to NATO’s capability development. The focus on developing sustainable forces was acknowledged as a particular German approach that distinguished the FNC from other initiatives such as the British-led JEF, a rapidly deployable force capable of conducting the full spectrum of operations, which relied on existing capabilities.\textsuperscript{69} Although NATO

\textsuperscript{65} An innovation created in connection with the RAP, NFIUs are meant to act as liaison units between national and NATO forces, assisting host nations with defence planning and multinational training and exercises and, in the event of a crisis, facilitating the rapid deployment of NATO forces to the region.


\textsuperscript{67} Carter, remarks at Atlantik-Brücke.


exercises uncovered shortages in the Bundeswehr’s capability for rapid deployment, German officials identified the alliance’s ability to deploy follow-on forces as the bigger challenge. In the end, a third way was chosen. Medium- and long-term capability development remained the concept’s principal focus, but in order to sustain its relevance the FNC now aimed at providing usable capabilities for the ‘follow-on forces’ called for by the RAP.70

At the midpoint between the NATO summits in Wales and Warsaw, the FNC was well established and developing further. In Wales it was adopted not only for the German group, but also as the organizational model for Britain’s JEF initiative and for a group facilitated by Italy.71 Some months later, several clusters in the German-led group had started to meet and the facilitators were happy to note that a feeling of ‘mutual understanding’ appeared to be emerging among the ten members.72 During the NATO defence ministerial meeting of June 2015, six east European partners joined the group, bearing witness to the concept’s continued attractiveness. Together the FNC partners decided to meet regularly and to ‘explore ways of aligning the FNC efforts with the strategic adaptation and transformation of NATO, including with the Readiness Action Plan as [a] crucial element of NATO’s adaptation’.73 For the time being, however, the German role remained crucial, as other partners were reluctant to step forward as framework nations for any of the capability packages. This made the (informal) linkage between the FNC and related initiatives such as TACET even more important. The focus on activities of short duration and on the reassurance of allies, as well as the prominent involvement of the United States, made it easier for smaller allies to engage with the concept and even to consider assuming leadership responsibility for a project with limited scope.74

Through its FNC initiative and its contributions to the RAP, Germany had become a key player in the West’s military response to Russian assertiveness. Commentators and diplomats noted that Germany’s political and economic clout, combined with a new readiness to contribute militarily, had made it the ‘backbone

70 The changing security environment also had an impact on the decision-making process in the German defence ministry, the heightened political focus giving the ministry’s political department increased leverage to push planners for rapid results. At the same time, increased defence budgets offered unexpected room for manoeuvre to a department that had lived through decades of cuts. Author’s interview with officials at the German Ministry of Defence, May–June 2015, and at NATO HQ in Brussels, Nov. 2015.


72 Author’s interview with officials at the German Ministry of Defence, May–June 2015; Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 18/8389, Überprüfung der Neuausrichtung der Bundeswehr und aktuelle Strukturentscheidungen vor dem Hintergrund des Weißbuches (Berlin, 1 Sept. 2015), p. 10.

73 NATO, ‘Informal framework nations (FNC) meeting’, press release, Brussels, 24 June 2015. Existing clusters as of June 2015 were Logistics, Medical Support, CBRN (Defence against Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear threats), CIMIC (Civil–Military Cooperation), Mission Networks, Joint Fires, Air C2 (Command and Control for Air Assets), DAAM (Deployable Air Activation Modules), Anti-Submarine Warfare, Air and Missile Defence, JISR (Joint Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) and GEOMETOC Support (support with geographic, meteological and oceanographic information). On the FNC’s record of implementation see Ruiz Palmer, Framework Nations Concept, pp. 13–14.

74 At the Warsaw summit FNC and TACET together with other multinational initiatives were welcomed as an ‘important contribution to capability development and our strengthened posture’: Warsaw Summit Communiqué, point 78, NATO official text, 9 July 2016.
of the alliance’. Yet the heightened focus on Germany’s role in NATO’s new defence and deterrence posture also gave more urgency to questions about its reliability. Would Germany really be willing to deploy the spearhead force in the event of a Russian attack? East European decision-makers and commentators remained concerned about Germany’s insistence on a dual-track policy towards Russia and wondered whether Berlin’s fear of confrontation with Moscow would detract from the alliance’s ability to mount a credible deterrence. In June 2015, just as NATO tested its new spearhead force with Germany as the Framework Nation, an opinion poll showed that 58 per cent of Germans would not support defending an ally in the case of an Article 5 situation. These numbers did not indicate sympathy with Russia but confirmed the German public’s reluctance towards any sort of military confrontation. More concretely, sceptics pointed out Germany’s restrictive deployment law as a potential hindrance to the spearhead force’s rapid deployment. Indeed, as the Rühe Commission pointed out, ‘NATO’s ability to act rapidly will … depend decisively on the forces pledged when the VJTF was planned being reliably available.’

The German government categorically rejected these concerns, on two grounds. First, it emphasized the difference between crisis management and collective defence. If asked to contribute to a crisis management mission in the framework of a coalition of the willing or NATO, Germany would always have to weigh factors of solidarity, urgency, interest and international law against one another. As the Libyan episode had shown, such considerations were unlikely ever to result in complete non-participation, but could result in a limited engagement (or constructive disengagement). In a situation that brought into play Article 5 on collective defence, by contrast, Germany would most likely feel obliged to contribute substantially. Second, officials pointed out that despite the Bundestag’s comparably far-reaching powers, it has never rejected a government proposal for the deployment of the Bundeswehr and in cases of urgency had been able to reach a decision within a few days. In response to an interjection from the opposition, the government maintained that it would be possible to speed up the decision-making process to meet the requirements of a VJTF deployment without compromising the parliament’s right to exercise oversight. While this claim is largely supported by security experts, the question remains whether an attack on

76 Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes and Jacob Poushter, NATO publics blame Russia for Ukrainian crisis, but reluctant to provide military aid [Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2015]. This interpretation was confirmed by a poll of German public opinion on Russia in 2016: Gabriele Schöler and Agnieszka Lada, Frayed partnership. German public opinion on Russia (Gütersloh/Warsaw: Bertelsmann/ISP, 2016).
77 Gotkowska, ‘Germany’s idea of a European army’.
78 Deutscher Bundestag, Final report, p. 16.
79 Author’s interviews with officials from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, Berlin, Feb. 2015.
a NATO ally will be perceived as an Article 5 scenario. Given that such a crisis might result from a hybrid warfare style aggression or a cyber incident, it seems far from evident that German decision-makers agree with their allies on the necessity to confront Russia militarily.81

Apart from the question of political will, Germany’s reliability and credibility as a leader are also questioned with regard to its capabilities. As a framework nation, Germany not only has the coordination responsibility but is also committed to make substantial force contributions; and the decade–long focus on crisis management operations has led to neglect of the core capabilities necessary for collective defence tasks. Under the shadow of the Ukraine crisis the government eventually acknowledged the need to redress this shortcoming, and announced the acquisition of new material and the refurbishment of vehicles.82 It repeatedly insisted, however, that Germany was capable of making the necessary contributions to the VJTF and to other forces (including the EU battle group, for which Germany would take over as lead nation in 2016).83 Doubts about Germany’s capabilities were also fuelled by the country’s procurement system, which has been a constant source of trouble for years. Months before the election of 2013 a scandal over the failed development of a European drone almost led to the fall of Defence Minister de Maizière. His successor ordered a complete review of all procurement projects and changed key posts in the ministry’s leadership. Faced with the multiple crises of 2014, however, she had to admit considerable gaps and embarrassing malfunctions in the Bundeswehr’s capabilities: there were not enough transport planes to evacuate personnel from Ebola-infected areas or to ship defence material and trainers to northern Iraq.84 In the autumn of 2014 von der Leyen had to face media reports based on sources in her own ministry stating that Germany was unable to assume its NATO commitments, and in February 2015 there were new reports about capability shortfalls in the units that were supposed to form the core of the future spearhead force.85

On a more general level, Germany’s defence spending remains an issue, not only for the United States and NATO but also for European allies. Eastern allies in particular saw German defence spending as part of the debate on Europe’s ability to defend and deter. As long as Germany gave no sign of spending more than 1.3 per cent of its GDP on defence, other allies felt under no pressure to do

82 Anton Troianowski, ‘Ukraine crisis spurs calls in Germany to reverse years of trimming army’, Wall Street Journal, 8 March 2015.
83 Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 18/5636, Überprüfung der Neuausrichtung der Bundeswehr und aktuelle Strukturentwicklungen vor dem Hintergrund des Weißbuches (Berlin, 1 Sept. 2015), pp. 38–41.
so.\textsuperscript{86} For years German governments had insisted on the primacy of output over input. Also, the FNC initiative of 2013 had been driven by the conviction that the problem of European defence could be solved only through more cooperation and integration. Only weeks before the Wales summit, Germany’s Defence Minister insisted that no substantial increase in the defence budget was in sight, and that improving German and European capabilities was ‘not only a question about how much money we spend but also how we spend the money and for what.’\textsuperscript{87} Nevertheless, the rapidly changing situation during the summer of 2014 had an impact on Germany’s position in this respect as well. In Wales, Chancellor Merkel agreed to the ‘pledge’ by which all member states committed themselves to spend a minimum of 2 per cent of GDP on defence within a decade, and to invest 20 per cent of their defence budgets in major equipment, including related research and development.\textsuperscript{88} The carefully crafted and heavily hedged-around wording of the ‘pledge’ did not commit allies to more than stopping the decline of their defence spending, and the Chancellor made clear that she was not willing to make dramatic changes. However, in the German case even halting decline meant a substantial increase of the defence budget, and as the multiple crises continued to unfold the pressure on European countries to react increased further. Reflecting this development, the government’s budget proposal for 2015 foresaw a rise of 1.4 billion euros for the next year and an increase of 6.2 per cent over the following five years.\textsuperscript{89} Distancing herself from the ‘breadth before depth’ principle that had been the \textit{leitmotiv} of armed forces reform for years, Defence Minister von der Leyen argued that the Bundeswehr had to maintain a certain breadth but also needed to specialize, a balance that required more resources.\textsuperscript{90} While these adaptations were not enough to silence the most critical voices, they underlined the government’s message about taking a more active and responsible role in European security. Individually, the FNC initiative, the different contributions to the RAP and the investment in new capabilities may not be very impressive, and arguably German decision-makers have little interest in suggesting a major paradigm shift in the country’s military role. Seen together, however, these elements represent a significant development in Germany’s role as a security player—a shift that has been perceived as substantial by partners and allies as well as by German officials and military personnel. According to Martin Erdmann, a former German Ambassador to NATO who had experienced the credibility loss during the Libyan crisis, ‘it was as if the [Ukraine crisis] flipped a switch on the way Germans thought about security and defense policy’.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{86} Author’s interview with officials from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warsaw, May 2015.
\textsuperscript{87} Ursula von der Leyen, speech to the Atlantic Council, Washington DC, 19 June 2014.
\textsuperscript{88} NATO, \textit{Wales summit declaration}, point 14.
The shift is even more noticeable when seen in the context of a broader development in German security policy that includes a more active debate on the country’s role and responsibility in the world and an increased willingness to contribute militarily in crisis management operations.

Conclusion

In an ever more volatile and complex security environment, Germany can no longer choose whether it wants to take a leading responsibility or not. European partners and the United States in particular are calling for more German leadership, and decision-makers in Berlin seem more willing than ever to respond to them. The questions raised in this article have been what shape Germany will give to this new role and whether German-led security initiatives can give added value to European defence cooperation.

The FNC proposal of 2013 and contributions to NATO’s strategic adaptation show a new willingness by German decision-makers to launch initiatives that commit their country to a leading role in European security. This engagement reflects continuities as well as adjustments in Germany’s role and self-understanding as a player in European and international security policy. External pressure to accept the role of a leading power in European security has increased since unification in 1990 and has intensified significantly over the past five years. The conflict with Russia over Ukraine, the multiple crises in the Middle East and North Africa, and the weakness or absence of France and Britain have become accelerating factors. As The Economist noted in 2015, ‘German leadership is taking shape faster than anyone planned’ and ‘it was by default rather than intent that Germany so rapidly became a “middle power”’. Since the beginning of the 2010s decision-makers in Berlin have acknowledged the growing expectations, and the FNC is an example of how they have responded to them without giving up the country’s traditional commitment to multilateralism and preference for sharing leadership responsibility with others. It is also an effort to frame the promotion of national interests in a way that avoids giving the impression of dominance and hegemony. This approach to leadership was defined by Defence Minister von der Leyen in 2015 as ‘leading from the centre’, and corresponds with Foreign Minister Steinmeier’s notion of Germany as Europe’s Chief Facilitating Officer.

While the new readiness to lead is generally applauded as a further step in the country’s development as a ‘normal’ European Great Power, Germany’s collaborative approach is also perceived as ambivalent and frequently leads to misunderstandings among allies. Debates on the FNC and on Berlin’s contributions to the


93 ‘A lurch onto the world stage’, The Economist, 28 Feb. 2015.


RAP show that Germany’s leadership in Europe is often perceived as too cautious by some and too dominant by others.\textsuperscript{96} However, the fact that 16 countries have joined the FNC and the fact that they also follow Berlin on related initiatives such as TACET or controversial operations such as the NATO mission in the Aegean suggest that most allies ultimately accept the particularities of Germany’s strategic culture and prefer its emphasis on shared and partial leadership to non-engagement and passivity.

Looking beyond the particular role of Germany, the FNC also reflects a broader trend in Euro-Atlantic security policy, in relation to which it can be seen as an effort to overcome a fundamental dilemma in defence cooperation. While no one questions the need for more and closer cooperation, few states are willing to give up more sovereignty. Budgetary constraints, geostrategic shifts and a plethora of traditional and new security challenges mean that no state can handle security challenges on its own. However, fears about losing control and frustration over the slow pace of cooperation among an EU membership of 28 leads Europeans to rely increasingly on national solutions or ‘partial cooperation’ in bi- and minilateral formats. There is widespread concern among security experts that this development is contributing to a renationalization of security and tending to undermine the established pillars of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Initiatives such as the FNC show that the emergence of more flexible forms of cooperation does not necessarily lead to a weakening of NATO and the EU. In fact, by proposing concrete steps for deeper defence cooperation under the leadership of one or several bigger nations, these formats might even provide a necessary revitalization of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture at a time when action is needed and comprehensive reform proves difficult to achieve.
