

Germany's AfD on Foreign Policy Report Summary

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This memo summarises the contents of the report *Germany's AfD on Foreign Policy: Competing visions and internal fragmentation* (FOI-R--5946--SE).

POPULIST PARTIES HAVE increasingly gained political influence in Europe and the US over the course of the past decade. Germany, with its long and distinctive history, was an outlier in Europe, with right-wing voices less prevalent in politics, and, for decades, the steadfast “culture of remembrance” (Erinnerungskultur) has been the gold standard for critically confronting its dark past. In the past ten years, however, the emergence and rapid growth of populist parties has become a feature of German politics as well. Founded in the wake of the Eurozone Crisis in 2013, the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, hereafter AfD) has experienced both rapid growth and dramatic radicalisation, especially in the past few years. In 2025, the AfD became the second-largest party in Germany's federal election.

As the political “firewall” against the radical right has weakened across Europe, Germany, however, has remained a notable exception. All parties in the political mainstream still reject any kind of cooperation with the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Notwithstanding this, the AfD has solidified its position as a major political opposition force that dominates the agenda on issues such as migration, the debt brake, and energy. It is therefore no longer a peripheral protest force in the German political system. The AfD party leadership has repeatedly stated its intention to assume government responsibility following the 2029 federal election.

Especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the party has also increasingly criticised the German government's foreign policy, while formulating alternative approaches that are frequently diametrically opposed to the current course of action and often resemble Kremlin positions. The AfD's foreign

and security policy positions and worldview differ substantially from those of the political mainstream, particularly concerning relations with Russia, the broader transatlantic partnership, and Germany's commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union's (EU) defence cooperation.

Amid a deteriorating security environment and domestic political and economic challenges, the AfD has continued to gain support since the 2025 federal election, and the current government, led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz, is facing mounting political pressure from the opposition. These developments prompt questions about whether the AfD, in a future scenario of increased power and influence, would be willing and able to reshape German foreign policy in line with its preferences, for example, in the role of a coalition partner.

The report analyses the AfD's preferences on key foreign policy issues. More specifically, it examines how the party perceives the international system and Germany's role within it, its approach to Russia and the Russo-Ukrainian war, and its views on the US administration and transatlantic relations in the security domain. It analyses the AfD's preferences on European security cooperation, with a primary focus on NATO given the party's broad rejection of deeper EU centralisation and thus common defence integration.

The study found that the AfD's foreign policy preferences are a work in progress, with its foreign policy still undefined on several fronts. This is mainly due to internal fragmentation and preference-based divisions between two main factions, comprising primarily the eastern and western state party associations, respectively. The former tends to be more radical and ideological in its foreign policy outlook, not shying away

from expressing Russia-friendly stances, whereas the latter gives the impression of a more strategic and tactical stance, at least rhetorically, to avoid alienating centrist constituencies, particularly in the western parts of the country. The party's current co-leadership can be said to represent these two factions, with Tino Chrupalla representing the more radical faction and Alice Weidel the more tactical one.

The analysis found that the factions disagree on nearly all issues covered in this analysis, whether concerning Russia, the US, or European defence cooperation. The disagreements are mainly evident in public communications from the party leadership as well as from individual parliamentarians, spokespersons, or local representatives. Divisions that are visible in public communication concern, *inter alia*, the description of the threat posed by Russia and visions for Russian-German relations. Differences also concern how the party should position itself in relation to the US administration in light of Trump's increasingly interventionist foreign policy.

The more tactical faction attempts to avoid alienating centrist constituencies by adopting more moderate rhetoric, while still seeking renewed energy ties with Russia, an end to German support for Ukraine, and alignment with the Trump administration. Under the influence of this faction, the party is more likely to pursue an incremental "Germany first" policy, retaining institutional memberships, cooperating selectively, and subtly shaping policies from within. The more radical faction pushes for a fundamental reorientation of Germany's international partnerships, advocating closer ties with Russia, distancing Germany from the US and other Western partners, and potentially leaving key institutions. If this faction were dominant and in power, Germany could strive to challenge the core tenets of traditional German diplomacy. The potential trajectory of an AfD-driven foreign policy hinges on which faction that dominates.

Despite the internal differences, both factions share certain ideals. These include, for instance, a view of Germany as a sovereign power that, in a multipolar world, prioritises national economic interests over collective Western values. This signals a willingness to move away from Germany's post-Cold War tradition of adhering to multilateralism, international rules, and alliance solidarity. Under AfD influence, this outlook could substantially alter Germany's cooperation patterns and weaken alignment with Western partners.

Additional issues on which there is factional agreement concern Germany's approach to Ukraine and energy policy. There is also cross-factional agreement on recommencing energy trade with Russia and lifting EU sanctions, while ceasing all assistance to Ukraine and preventing Ukraine's membership of European institutions. Under AfD influence, a dramatic pivot from current policy on Ukraine, institutional enlargement, sanctions, and energy trade is undoubtedly a given.

Whether the AfD, in a scenario of increased power and influence, would actually be able to change either the style or content of German foreign policy in one of the above-mentioned ways would, however, depend on several factors. These include, notably, the role it would play within a potential coalition and the nature of such a coalition. The party's size would also matter, for example, whether the AfD was the largest party in a coalition or a large junior partner, as this would influence portfolio allocation, negotiation fallout, and subsequent opportunities to exercise vetoes.

Lastly, one can speculate whether the AfD would be more interested in using foreign policy for political marketing and domestic mobilisation than in striving for change. Should the party strive for change, the competing visions and internal fragmentation, as depicted above, could, if not resolved, make it difficult for the party to turn its preferences into actionable policy and limit the extent to which it can change Germany's foreign relations in a fundamental way. ■