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## Introduction

On 12 February 2024, Berlin, Paris and Warsaw pitched for the Weimar Triangle as the new centrepiece for the EU's defence (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024), aiming to enhance defence capability. Following these discussions, in April, the German defence minister, Boris Pistorius recommended Poland join the 'Main Ground Combat System' (MGCS). By June, Poland indicated its willingness to join the Franco-German projects: the 'Future Combat Air System' (FCAS) and MGCS projects (Alipour, 2024a). Despite this momentum, defence ministers of Poland and Germany remain silent when journalists ask for more details. In June, France also deepened its military ties with Germany and Poland (Kayali, 2024), indicating growing momentum for defence collaboration within the Weimar Triangle. By aligning national defence priorities, France, Germany, and Poland could play a more substantial role in defence and transform, at some point, the Weimar Triangle into a defence alliance.

Historically, the Weimar Triangle has made outstanding achievements. However, cooperation has not been inconsistent during the last decades, with partners experiencing challenges of trust and misalignment. The evolving international landscape, characterised by the intensification of conflict in Ukraine since 2022 and the upcoming United States (US) election, has prompted new developments and investments in European defence cooperation.

This paper will discuss the potential of the Weimar Triangle to develop into a more robust defence alliance and the importance of Poland's integration into the FCAS and the MGCS consortia. Firstly, the paper will begin with a background analysis of the Weimar Triangle cooperation, and an overview of the military expenditure of the partners, the FCAS and the MGCS projects. Moreover, it will draw on the international landscape and specifically Poland's situation that fosters defence collaboration. Secondly, this paper will analyse the current obstacles threatening cooperation. To conclude, this paper will examine Poland's defence policy and relations with its key partners to assess the feasibility of integration within both consortia.

## I. Background

The Weimar Triangle was established in 1991 by the impetus of German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher (France Diplomatie, n.d.). It aimed to bring French, German and Poland's vision closer and drive the German-Polish reconciliation (France Diplomatie, n.d.). Additionally, it played a crucial role in facilitating Poland's accession to NATO (1999) and the EU (2004). Then, the Weimar Triangle became a political forum ahead of the European Union negotiations (France Diplomatie, n.d.). Since 8 March 2022, the focus of the discussion has been on Ukraine and has evolved progressively towards encompassing external security, defence policy and weapons assistance in the country (Weimarer-Dreieck-Portal, n.d.). This has provided a boost for defence cooperation, which resulted on 12 February 2024 in France, Poland and Germany pitching for using the Weimar Triangle as a new centrepiece for the EU defence (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024).

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## Military Expenditure

France, Germany and Poland embody the largest defence spenders in the EU, hence their influential position in the EU defence policy. Collectively, these countries represent a significant portion of the EU's population - 188 million out of 448 million inhabitants within the EU (European Union, n.d.), further increasing their responsibility in defence matters. In particular, France and Germany are the top defence spenders in the EU, with estimated expenditures of 43.9 billion euros and 50.3 billion euros respectively in 2023 (Tardy & Matelly, 2023). These countries also maintain a high percentage of military personnel per population size, reinforcing their critical role in the European defence. Poland ramped up heavily in defence spending after 2022 and is now in the top five EU countries with the most military personnel (Tardy & Matelly, 2023). Poland is among the EU's highest defence spenders relative to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Recently, Poland planned to increase its defence spending share to reach 4% of its GDP. In response to the war in Ukraine, Poland raised its spending by 11% (Tardy & Matelly, 2023). Overall, this investment enhances Poland's military capabilities but also strengthens its influence on EU defence policy.

## The FCAS and the MGCS

On 24 June 2024, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, Poland's Defence Minister, suggested that Poland could be open to joining two major European defence projects. The Franco-German defence projects, which would aim to produce "a European-made fighter jet and battle tank" (Alipour, 2024), were mentioned by the Polish Defence Minister. It could be the 'Future Combat Air System' (FCAS), designed to replace existing aircraft, namely the Eurofighter and the Rafale (Airbus, n.d). The new battle tank could be the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS), meant to replace the German Leopard II and the French Leclerc, integrating the most recent technologies (Ministère des armées, 2023). The FCAS project involves a consortium of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) originating from France, Germany, and Spain (Dassault, 2024). MCGS is a project between France and Germany and will include disruptive technology such as Artificial Intelligence (Ministère des armées, 2023). Germany is driving for the MGCS, and France is piloting the FCAS (Kayali & Larson, 2023). Poland's participation in these projects could be a significant development as Poland is one of the EU Member states with the highest defence expenditures (Tardy & Matelly, 2023).

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## The International Situation and Poland Situation Foster Defence Collaboration

This contingency of including Poland in both consortia (the FCAS and MGCS) arises thanks to Donald Tusk's return to power (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). The return of the pro-EU head of state in Poland changed expectations and offered new opportunities for collaboration. Regarding defence policy, Donald Tusk favours international cooperation over traditional bilateral policy (Pawłuszko, 2022). This emphasis on multilateral collaboration has been particularly beneficial for the Weimar Triangle, aligning with Poland's foreign policy objective and reinforcing its defence strategy. For this reason, in April, the German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius suggested Poland join the MGCS next to his French peer, Sebastien Lecornu. In June, Poland declared it would be open to joining the two Franco-German projects: the FCAS and MGCS (Alipour, 2024a). However, Poland refused to confirm this information concretely.

The current international situation with the ongoing conflicts has pressed the EU's Member states to increase their defence cooperation. The intensification of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022 made them realise that war is at the EU's borders. Indeed, the Weimar Triangle finally agreed in 2024 that Russia is the biggest threat. This is very encouraging, as partners now share a common ground that fosters defence collaboration (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). This is very important as it could facilitate the effectiveness of their defence policy to become more aligned than before, and their strategy will serve a common goal: addressing the Russian threat. Additionally, the proposition of Poland joining the FCAS and the MGCS came to light after Trump's comment on the US engagement with NATO (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). The US election in November 2024 casts uncertainty on the future of EU-US collaboration, particularly if Trump returns to power (Sullivan, 2024). It could mark the American withdrawal from NATO (Lefebvre, 2024). Therefore, the EU would not be as protected as before, and the European Defence Alliance could be potentially embodied in the Weimar Triangle.

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## II. The Obstacles Faced by the Weimar Triangle

The obstacles in this collaboration are numerous. The Weimar Triangle is, for now, only a discussion forum, so transforming it into a robust defence alliance will be difficult (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). From a historical point of view, Poland still does not believe it can count on France's nuclear deterrence due to the vivid memory of the Second World War (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024), whereby France chose not to attack Germany when it directly invaded Poland in 1939. It seems that "Paris is all busy with her teenage love affairs with London (...) Berlin is doing some introspective work (...) while Warsaw fears remaining alone on its eastern front." (Gros Verheyde, 2011). Even if there seems to be momentum for EU defence, the Weimar Triangle has proved in the past its capacity to speak soliloquies rather than unify its voice.

The recent French national election has cast doubt on the future defence collaboration between France, Germany and Poland. The election, which concluded on July 7th (Deloy, 2024), saw the left win this election, followed closely by the presidential party and the far right (Politico, 2024). This has raised concerns over the potential jeopardisation of the joint consortia (FCAS & MGCS). The German and Polish Defence Ministers have expressed concerns about a possible coalition between the presidential and far-right parties, emphasising that support for Ukraine "was not open to debate" (Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). The French far-right opposes sending military equipment (except long-range missiles) and military instructors to Ukraine, which contradicts the current stance of the French Defence Minister. Meanwhile, the left is disinterested in the defence question and incapable of agreeing (Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). The future potential coalition casts uncertainty as none of the political parties share a similar point of view on defence conduct (Caulcutt, 2024). This complicates the efforts to step up the collaboration within the Weimar Triangle and build solid consortia.

Arguably, transforming the Weimar Triangle into a robust defence alliance is a challenging deed. Cooperation in developing standardised armaments is a sensitive issue. Evidence of this includes the slow pace of the FCAS's development, which involves both France and Germany (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). Indeed, incorporating Poland into the defence consortia will take time. Nevertheless, Poland still intends to join weaponry development: the FCAS and the MGCS (Alipour, 2024). Meanwhile, Warsaw also declared its intention to join the European Sky Shield Initiative, a German-led coalition to create a unified European air defence system. However, the German chancellor Olaf Scholz refused to name projects on which the Weimar Triangle could collaborate (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). Their strategy of staying silent in those settings could also be highly beneficial, as they do not want to reveal their upcoming industrial weaponry development.

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Furthermore, the influence that each partner exercises is uneven. Germany is considered an industrial superpower (Eckl-Doma et al., 2024). France has an even more substantial position of power due to its status as one of the official atomic powers and one of the Second World War winners (Norris & Cochran, 2024). Plus, Poland has to find its place within the consortia, which involves other EU partners than France and Germany, because components of the future FCAS development involve several EU Member States (EPIIC, European Funding & Tender portal, n.d).

### **III. Poland's Defence Policy and Relations with Partners**

Poland's trust in Germany has significantly declined in recent years. Since 2015, Poland has been highly critical of the Nordstream I and II pipeline projects (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2016). Germany also opposed the plan for Poland to build an American anti-missile system and criticised Poland's efforts to secure NATO bases on its territory (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2016; Terlikowski, 2017). Arguably, this period has been characterised by a pronounced polarisation in the relationship between Germany and Poland.

Poland's defence approach reflects its national political situation. During the last decades, Polish governance has oscillated between far-right and pro-European parties (Stolarek J.M. & Gontarczyk, 2024). There are two dominant parties which alternate in holding the governance power: the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska) party and the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party. In truth, parties lack consensus about Poland's long-term foreign policy priorities (Pawłuszko, 2022). The liberal party (PO) tends to emphasise the importance of international cooperation, whereas the conservative party (PiS) generally favours traditional bilateral diplomacy.

This polarisation and continuous alternation of power between the two parties has reinforced Poland's strategic commitment to strengthening its transatlantic relationships and allies. As a result, Poland has reinforced its ties with South Korea and Israel, allies of the US, and subsequently has prioritised its transatlantic relationship with the US (Pawłuszko, 2022).

In this context, Poland has sourced its military from the US and South Korea, demonstrating its commitment to these allies and their policies (Alipour & Bourgery-Gonse, 2024). For example, Poland plans to buy K2 Black Panther tanks, K9 self-propelled howitzers, FA-50 light combat aircraft, and Chunmoo multiple rocket launch systems (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2024). By doing so, Poland hopes the US will continue to protect them from Russia. However, heavy investment in non-EU armaments could complicate Poland's involvement with the EU weaponry development. Indeed, Poland's armament purchasing complicates its investment in the Weimar Triangle.



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## Conclusion

This paper explores whether the Weimar Triangle could become a more robust defence alliance and integrate Poland into the FCAS and the MGCS consortia. For now, the Weimar Triangle is only a forum, and it will take time to build trust between partners. However, EU defence is gaining momentum thanks to the war in Ukraine and the upcoming US election (Lefebvre, 2024). Additionally, for the last two years, the discussion of the Weimar Triangle has shifted progressively toward defence matters. To reach the development stage, the MGCS and the FCAS will have to face obstacles. However, in the past, the Weimar Triangle proved its ability to achieve significant accomplishments. Now, what remains to be seen is whether Poland will join FCAS and MGCS consortia. In conclusion, Poland's participation would enable the EU to develop common weaponry and progressively ensure its defence autonomy.

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