



# Metis

## Study

### Worst Cases II

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Institute for  
Strategy & Foresight

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# Summary

This follow-up study to the Metis study 'Worst Cases' (No. 41) develops five interlinked scenarios: an Israeli-Turkish war over influence in Syria, a jihadist 'caliphate belt' stretching from the Atlantic to the Euphrates, a democratic breakdown in

Germany, a forced blockade of the Strait of Malacca, and the end of transatlantic cohesion. Their common denominator is the structural overload on European and German capacity to act, caused by the combined effect of external shocks and endogenous erosion.

## Worst Cases II – From thinking beyond the comfort zone to acting before disaster strikes

The Metis study 'Worst Cases'<sup>1</sup>, published in May 2024, outlined five geopolitical worst-case scenarios as plausible, albeit hypothetical, extreme developments: a Russian victory in Ukraine; the loss of the Sahel to systemic rivals and radical groups; a war with Iran; an armed conflict over Taiwan; and a weakening of NATO under Trump. Less than twelve months after the publication of this study, some of the scenarios that were then still treated as borderline cases have become part of Europe's reality. Strategic foresight as a whole is facing a paradigm shift characterised by three features: scenarios conceived as extreme cases are actually materialising within a short space of time and losing their exceptional nature; in other words, worst-case scenarios are becoming reality more frequently; risks overlap and reinforce one another, which is why interactions must be given much greater consideration; and strategic foresight is shifting from prevention towards resilience and strategic planning under conditions of perpetual crisis.

Whilst traditional analyses focus primarily on dyadic military escalations, the current landscape is now dominated by systemic chain reactions, non-linear crisis dynamics and the increasing intertwining of security policy with technology, the economy and the environment. Worst-case scenarios fulfil their analytical purpose as long as they can be

treated as thought experiments – a controlled glimpse into a possible, yet avertable, abyss. However, when individual scenarios can no longer be read as warnings but rather as descriptions of the situation, the focus shifts further towards strategic planning. The focus is no longer primarily on prevention, but on crisis resilience under conditions of simultaneous and mutually reinforcing pressures. The scenarios developed here should therefore not be understood as a continuation of the narrative, but as an expansion of the interplay between those developments already explored in the first study.<sup>2</sup> Their common denominator is the structural overstretching of Europe's and Germany's capacity to act, caused by institutional dysfunction, the withdrawal of US security guarantees in their current form, the end of transatlantic cohesion, the economic decoupling of global supply chains and the erosion of democracy. The result is not necessarily a single catastrophic rupture, but rather the gradual slipping below those thresholds beneath which European security, prosperity and political capacity for action can no longer be taken for granted.

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<sup>1</sup> See "Worst Cases", Metis Study No. 41 (May 2024).

<sup>2</sup> The five scenarios are conceived as conditional pathways of possibility. The cross-references between them indicate conditional linkages (conditions of possibility), not causal necessity. The interrelationships illustrate potential for reinforcement and do not represent an inevitable cascade of escalation. In strategic foresight, the probability of occurrence and the sequence remain open. What is analytically relevant is the structural connectivity of the scenarios, not their aggregation into a single final state.



In this context, worst-case thinking is not an expression of pessimism, but an analytical necessity. This study is aimed at those who are prepared to consider the implications of a world in which worst-case scenarios are no longer the exception, but are increasingly the structural condition under which European and German foreign and security policy must operate.

### Theoretical assumptions: Long cycle theory

The following scenarios are based on assumptions of long cycle theory (LCT). LCT describes the development of international orders as a cyclical process lasting approximately 100 to 130 years, structured by periodic shifts in relative material power between great powers. Analytically, the theory distinguishes four phases: a phase of macro-decision-making (*world war*) in which systemic wars destroy existing orders and establish new ones; agenda-setting (*world power*), in which the victorious leading power consolidates hegemonic structures and provides global public goods; *delegitimation*, in which emerging rivals undermine the order and restrict the provision of public goods; and coalition-building (*deconcentration*), in which opposing power blocs form against the leading power.

The international system is currently in the early stages of coalition-building. The US-led liberal order is losing its

coherence and ability to assert itself. This process is characterised by institutional dysfunction, economic fragmentation and systemic rivalry between the US and China. The provision of global public goods such as the security of sea lanes, the stability of the reserve currency, technological standards and multilateral regulatory frameworks is becoming increasingly constrained, whilst alternative models of order, notably those under Chinese leadership, are gaining influence. Visible manifestations of these coalition-building tendencies include both economic clustering under the BRICS+ umbrella (Brasil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Indonesia) and the military-strategic consolidation of the CRINKPAK bloc (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan and smaller states), which together constitute a structural antithesis to the Western-led order. The current phase is characterised by non-linear crisis dynamics, the decentralisation of global power, regional conflicts and a partial decoupling of economic systems. A period of intense coalition-building is expected from 2030 onwards. The global order will then remain in a state of structural transition that is neither a consolidated unipolar nor a stable bipolar system. This ambiguity increases the likelihood of escalation processes leading to macro-level decisions.





### **Worst case #1** **Israeli–Turkish war over influence in Syria**

Following the collapse of the Assad regime and the fragile consolidation of the government led by HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) in Damascus, a power vacuum has emerged in Syria due to Kurdish structures in the north-east, in Alawite and Druze enclaves, in IS zones of influence, and in remaining pockets of Iranian proxies; a vacuum that two regional middle powers – Turkey and Israel – are vying to fill. Turkey is deepening its military and economic presence in the north, expanding bases in Idlib, Aleppo and along the Euphrates line, and pushing ahead with the disarmament of Kurdish SDF/YPG structures of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and People's Defense Units (YPG). At the same time, Turkey is accelerating its military build-up, which enables it to project power independently in the Levant. Ankara is positioning itself as a protective power in Lebanon and Syria, as well as the strongest supporter of Hamas. From Israel's perspective, its former cooperation partner is thus evolving into a disruptive power that threatens Israel's essential security interests. Israel is consequently expanding its security corridors in southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights, continuing its air campaign and targeted killings against residual Iranian structures and newly emerging jihadist groups in the region, and intensifying counter-insurgency operations in Gaza and the West Bank. In Syria, Israel is also attempting to establish a land link to Druze enclaves.

As a result, the conflict between Israel and Turkey escalates into a direct military confrontation. Dogfights between Israeli and Turkish fighter jets over Syrian territory, clashes between the Israeli and Turkish navies in the eastern Mediterranean over emerging energy corridors, and targeted killings of Hamas officials in Turkey and in Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus dominate the situation. In Syria, Druze and Israeli forces are fighting against HTS troops, IS and Turkish units. In the wake of the conflict, Israel is expanding its support for Kurdish groups, which are classified as terrorist organisations in Turkey. A call to invoke Article 5 of the NATO Treaty in response to Israeli activities in Northern Cyprus and Turkey is rejected by the majority of NATO member states. The West is divided. Whilst the US and some EU member states are imposing sanctions on Turkey, others are remaining neutral or calling for sanctions against Israel. Russia and China are showing solidarity with Turkey and deepening their economic and military cooperation with Ankara.

The conflict structurally weakens NATO's south-eastern flank, as one member state is engaged in open conflict with the closest partner of the leading power, the US. Whilst Washington is unambiguously signalling that it will not abandon Israel and is sanctioning Turkey, EU member states remain divided. In Europe, domestic political, legal and ethical concerns prevail. The fear that any stance against Ankara will deepen dependence on it in matters of migration policy is paralysing any joint position. This further weakens

transatlantic cohesion, as the US pledges its unconditional support for Israel. Although Turkey's formal NATO membership remains intact, its operational ties have been eroded, as numerous NATO member states are adopting a neutral stance or supporting Israel. Moreover, direct confrontation threatens to drag Greece and Cyprus (and thus ultimately the entire EU) into the conflict on Israel's side. This could result in a situation where the EU is effectively forced to take action against a NATO member state.

Furthermore, the war is exposing domestic political fault lines in Europe along religious, cultural and migration-related lines of conflict. Demonstrations by pro-Palestinian and pro-Turkish groups, attacks motivated by antisemitism and Islamophobia, and growing polarisation within diaspora communities are paralysing domestic political decision-making. In Germany in particular, the government is struggling to navigate the tightrope walk between the interests of the state and showing understanding for the large Turkish minority. Furthermore, Russian–Chinese cooperation with Turkey is bringing about structural changes to the region's security architecture. China is emerging as a key mediator in the conflict, whilst Russia is using its improved relations with Turkey to circumvent Western sanctions.

The symbolic and real impact of this shift is accelerating the coalition-building phase, as the US continues to lose its capacity to act in the Levant. For Germany, this results in a twofold pressure to act. Domestic political divisions jeopardise the formation of a parliamentary majority on security policy issues, whilst Germany's capacity for action in foreign policy remains constrained in both directions: vis-à-vis Ankara due to dependencies on migration, and vis-à-vis Tel Aviv due to historical responsibility. Following the logic of the long cycle theory, this conflict is only an indication of coalition-building if it leads to Turkey's irreversible alignment with the CRINKPAK bloc. If, on the other hand, this alignment remains reversible and Ankara can be reintegrated into transatlantic structures in the medium term, it constitutes a regional crisis without systemic implications.

### **Worst case #2** **The emergence of IS 2.0 from Mauritania to Syria**

As a result of the dominance of JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, IS control in border regions, structural state collapse in Chad and the activities of Boko Haram, jihadist power structures are becoming entrenched in the Sahel.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the EU's excessive focus on conventional deterrence against Russia is leading to the gradual neglect of counter-terrorism operations in the southern Mediterranean and the Sahel.

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<sup>3</sup> See "Islamist terrorism", Metis Study No. 44 (October 2025).



Radicalisation dynamics resulting from the wars in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran are further accelerating recruitment by transnational jihadist networks. The gradual withdrawal of Russian forces from Africa is creating a security vacuum that is not being filled by Chinese commercial presence, European stabilisation missions or a committed US policy. France, constrained by domestic politics and disillusioned by its experiences in Operation Barkhane, refuses any form of military return. In Bamako, a pan-Sahel caliphate is proclaimed, which establishes administrative structures and Sharia courts within a matter of months. As further Islamist groups join its ranks, the caliphate begins to operate between Mauritania and eastern Libya. Civil wars, collapsing state structures and fragmented security apparatuses destabilise large parts of North Africa and the Levant, facilitating the emergence of new jihadist sanctuaries. The Sudanese civil war escalates to the point where areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are infiltrated by jihadist networks. In Libya, the balance of power between Haftar and the Government of National Accord (GNA) collapses definitively, whilst jihadist groups take control of the southern oil fields and reactivate cross-border smuggling networks. In the Syrian Badia, which was never completely cleared of IS, a reconstitution takes place, linking up with residual networks in Iraq's Anbar province.

The result of these developments is not a coherent state structure, but a 'caliphate belt' – a transregional network of controlled territories, smuggling corridors and Islamist militias stretching from the Atlantic to the Euphrates. Owing to the resulting state fragility, annual migration flows towards Europe via the Central Mediterranean route are reaching new record levels. Tens of thousands of returning foreign fighters holding EU passports are acting as sleeper cells in France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. The frequency of terrorist attacks significantly exceeds the levels seen between 2015 and 2017. In exchange for the easing of sanctions regimes, Russia and China are offering European governments cooperation in counter-terrorism through their own intelligence services. Israel and Turkey, both already overstretched by the Israeli-Turkish conflict (see *Worst case #1*), close their borders by military means. Egypt becomes a frontline state and the recipient of massive European stabilisation aid, which, however, fails to stabilise the

situation. NATO's southern flank faces a quasi-state security challenge on a scale not seen in Europe since the conflicts with the Barbary States in the 19th century.

For Europe, the 'caliphate belt' poses three challenges. Firstly, migration is becoming a primary security threat. The EU's border regime is effectively collapsing; individual Member States are reintroducing comprehensive internal border controls. Frontline states such as Italy, Spain, Greece and Malta are receiving EU support, but this remains inadequate and has little impact. The northern Member States are gearing their security structures towards containing internal migration flows, which further weakens the protection of the EU's external borders in practical terms. Secondly, terrorism is evolving from an episodic to a structural challenge. Isolated attacks on mass events, critical infrastructure and political representatives polarise European societies between a faction advocating the maximisation of security measures and a faction championing civil liberties. Furthermore, the technological proliferation of drone technology, autonomy, artificial intelligence and cyber-physical systems makes terrorist attacks more precise, more lethal and more difficult to prevent. The Bundeswehr is bound by the obligation to provide administrative assistance in matters of internal security (Article 35 of the Basic Law), which materially restricts its alliance commitments. The debate on integration becomes the dominant domestic political issue, overshadowing traditional lines of conflict in social and economic policy, whilst the political space for pro-Russia and pro-China positions expands, as voters expect tangible security guarantees against migration and terrorism, regardless of the strategic costs. The resulting political fragmentation feeds directly into *Worst case #3* (see below). Thirdly, the nearshoring strategy pursued after 2020 to reduce dependence on Asian supply chains collapses definitively. North African production sites (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt) become high-risk zones. Investment flows back to Asia or the Americas (now subject to stricter American and Chinese conditions). According to the logic of the long cycle theory, the caliphate belt does not represent a competing pole, but rather a non-state principle of order that the declining hegemon and its allies can no longer suppress. The caliphate belt corresponds to a return to pre-Westphalian conditions on the European periphery.



Worst-case scenarios				
#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
<b>Israeli-Turkish War for Influence in Syria</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Israel is expanding its control in Lebanon and Syria to create a security zone</li> <li>• Turkey perceives Israel's actions as a threat and supports anti-Israeli groups and proxies</li> <li>• Northern Cyprus establishes itself as a safe haven for Hamas networks</li> <li>• Israeli pre-emptive strike on targets in Lebanon, Syria and Northern Cyprus</li> <li>• Direct military confrontation between Israel and Turkey</li> </ul>	<b>The emergence of IS 2.0 from Mauritania to Syria</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The EU's excessive focus on conventional deterrence against Russia leads to the neglect of counter-terrorism operations</li> <li>• Increased radicalisation due to the Gaza War, the Lebanon War and the Iran War</li> <li>• Civil wars and failing states are destabilising the region</li> <li>• Emergence of new sanctuaries in North Africa and the Levant for radical forces</li> </ul>	<b>Democratic breakdown in Germany</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic stagnation strengthens populist parties on the right of the political spectrum</li> <li>• The government loses its ability to ensure confidence in the effectiveness of the executive through reforms</li> <li>• Russian and Chinese narratives are paralysing decision-making</li> <li>• Germany is distancing itself from the previous NATO and EU line on China and Russia</li> </ul>	<b>Blockade in the Strait of Malacca</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous swarms and cyberattacks destabilise global maritime trade</li> <li>• GPS spoofing, UAVs and piracy render the Strait of Malacca effectively impassable</li> <li>• Insurers classify passage as no longer insurable</li> <li>• Global trade and energy supply chains temporarily collapse</li> </ul>	<b>The end of transatlantic cohesion and the collapse of NATO</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The US links Article 5 to transactional quid pro quo</li> <li>• Russia escalates hybrid operations on NATO's eastern flank</li> <li>• NATO command structures are losing operational credibility</li> <li>• Right-wing populist governments are blocking European security integration</li> </ul>
Implications for Europe and Germany				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The threat of direct confrontation risks dragging Greece and Cyprus into the conflict</li> <li>• A tension between national interests, EU defence obligations and NATO support</li> <li>• Turkey's shift away from the West towards Russia and China</li> <li>• Domestic protests in EU member states with large Turkish minorities; rise in antisemitism in Europe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collapse of the Schengen regime and militarisation of the EU's borders</li> <li>• EU forces are tied up with internal security tasks</li> <li>• Terrorism as a permanent structural threat to Europe</li> <li>• Nearshoring in North Africa fails once and for all</li> <li>• Russia and China gain influence through security cooperation</li> <li>• Europe's strategic dependence on China and the US deepens once again</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU integration is stagnating; Germany is becoming the main hold-up in the creation of an EU army</li> <li>• EU support for Ukraine is blocked by a German veto</li> <li>• The German economic model collapses due to increasingly anti-European policies</li> <li>• Germany advocates easing sanctions against Russia</li> <li>• The EU's capacity to act in foreign policy is permanently paralysed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collapse of global supply chains and massive energy price shocks</li> <li>• Pressure for deindustrialisation on key German industries rises dramatically</li> <li>• Europe's maritime vulnerability to autonomous A2/AD systems is exposed</li> <li>• Russia and China gain influence through alternative trade and transport corridors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The credibility of nuclear and conventional deterrence collapses</li> <li>• European security order fragments into regional power blocs</li> <li>• Germany loses its strategic anchorage through the US 'backstop' function</li> <li>• Russia and China are strategically exploiting Western disintegration</li> </ul>

Table 1 Overview of worst-case scenarios | Source: Author's own illustration



### Worst case #3 Democratic breakdown in Germany

Following a series of protests over the economy, energy and migration, a recession, high unemployment figures and a series of internal party splits, a right-wing populist coalition wins the snap elections in Germany. The new government defines its foreign policy approach on the basis of four principles: the suspension of further military aid to Ukraine; a veto against any expansion of the EU's sanctions regime against Russia; and the gradual normalisation of bilateral relations with Moscow and Beijing. Furthermore, Germany opposes the Europeanisation of NATO or the creation of an EU army. Domestically, the government strengthens the powers of the executive, restricts the powers of the constitutional courts, restructures the public service media, criminalises selected civil society organisations on the grounds of alleged foreign influence, and subjects the central security authorities to party-political oversight. Within the EU, it is systematically blocking decision-making on the Common Foreign and Security Policy as well as on the Asylum and Migration Pact.

The consequences for the EU are becoming apparent within a matter of months. In France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria, the political landscape is shifting towards right-wing populist coalitions. The Nordic Member States, Poland and the Baltic states are responding by establishing closer regional security cooperation outside the formal EU structures. The 'Coalition of the Willing' in support of Ukraine is falling apart. Russia interprets these developments as confirmation of its strategy of strategic patience and, at the same time, intensifies its hybrid influence operations in EU states through disinformation, cyber-attacks and the targeted corruption of decision-makers.

Fractures within a core EU state shift the focus of worst-case scenarios from external shocks to endogenous structural failure. The knock-on effects affect Germany in two ways. In terms of security policy, the previous consensus on strengthening NATO's eastern flank, meeting the five per cent defence spending target and pursuing major joint European armaments projects is no longer in place. Economically, the erosion of the single market is accelerated by uncoordinated industrial policy, divergent energy policies and protectionist measures by individual states. The German export-oriented business model loses its institutional foundation. The success of a right-wing populist, pro-Russian party in Germany strengthens similar political currents in neighbouring countries, which further complicates the formation of a majority for security policy decisions that can withstand pressure within the EU. From the perspective of long cycle theory, this scenario is particularly serious because the delegitimisation of the Western order is no longer primarily driven by external coalitions (CRINKPAK, BRICS+), but by the internal erosion of Western societies. The strategic implication is twofold: on the one hand, external security guarantees are losing their institutional resonance; and on the other, traditional deterrence strategies are becoming ineffective because the aggressor no longer needs kinetic escalation to achieve its strategic objectives.

### Worst case #4 Blockade in the Strait of Malacca

The Strait of Malacca is the most important maritime corridor for the global economy. By 2030, the proliferation of hypersonic weapons and autonomous swarms in the air, on the surface and underwater will have lowered the threshold for effectively challenging maritime control to such an extent that even non-state actors, militant groups and state proxies will be able to effectively disrupt traffic through this bottleneck. The crisis is unfolding in two phases, without any formal attribution to a state actor. In the first phase, several vectors of disruption overlap. Persistent GPS spoofing operations and sensor anomalies disrupt navigation, whilst targeted unmanned surface vehicle (USV) and drone attacks on merchant ships threaten the freedom of the seas. In addition, cyber intrusions into automatic identification systems (AIS), manifest and customs systems of regional port authorities, as well as low-threshold piracy, disrupt existing logistics chains. The average transit time increases within a matter of weeks. War risk premiums for selected cargo categories (petrochemicals, semiconductor precursors, just-in-time automotive inputs) multiply. There are isolated hostage-takings, temporary ship hijackings and multiple documented approaches by USVs, without any attributable claim of responsibility. Regional governments respond with an international maritime operation to secure the sea lanes, although the operation's mandate remains undefined.

The second phase begins with a coordinated swarm operation. Microdrones and seabed-deployed USVs launch synchronised attacks on sensors and merchant ships. The escorts' radar, sonar and communications systems are overwhelmed by a deluge of ambiguous contacts. The effect of the attacks is to force the escorts and merchant ships to retreat, without mass casualties and without a clear escalation threshold. Chinese and Russian ships, however, are barely affected. The kill chain of the highly autonomous systems closes faster than the defensive capabilities of the frigates deployed. Within four to six weeks, navigability through the strait is effectively suspended, without either side having declared a blockade. Insurance markets classify the passage as uninsurable and ships are diverted via the Lombok Strait. Transit costs, commodity prices and the Brent spot price continue to rise. Russia opens the Northeast Passage on politically calibrated terms, whilst China demonstrates relative resilience via the pipeline and rail corridors through Myanmar, Pakistan and Kazakhstan – a development interpreted in Asia as a retrospective justification of the Belt and Road strategy. A stabilisation plan brokered by India, Saudi Arabia and Brazil leads, after around four months, to the resumption of traffic under significantly stricter security and cost conditions, without the structural vulnerability of the passage being addressed.

For Europe, and Germany in particular, the Malacca crisis is giving rise to four structural shifts. Firstly, this scenario calls into question the paradigm of naval-centred maritime security.



The notion that escort vessels, layered air defence and private security contractors can guarantee the free passage of a global chokepoint is empirically refuted by the demonstration of a highly autonomous, cost-asymmetric and non-attributable anti-access / area denial system (A2/AD). The maritime balance of power is shifting from the ability to control maritime space to the ability to contain autonomous multi-domain threats and to reconstitute rapidly in the event of successful disruption. Secondly, the classical deterrence model based on attributability is collapsing. The combination of spoofed signatures, mixed commercial and military components, and distributed delivery platforms makes politically tenable attribution impossible. Punishment-based deterrence thereby loses its operational prerequisite. Thirdly, the resilience of global supply chains is shifting from a business optimisation task to a primary function of security policy. The German economy, whose gross domestic product is contracting as a result of the blockade, is feeling the impact of the disruption to East Asian input supply chains in the automotive, chemical and electronics industries. Shipping companies, commercial satellite operators, telecommunications providers and insurers are becoming indispensable de facto security actors with their own early-warning, route-optimisation and data-fusion capabilities, which complement state structures in the event of a crisis. Fourthly, the strategic response capacity of European armed forces in the maritime domain is insufficient for the tasks now becoming apparent. The European navies lack sufficient capabilities to counter unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and USVs on the scale that would be required for substantial participation in convoy or patrol operations in the Indian Ocean. The question of a permanent European presence in the Indo-Pacific is being played out politically against NATO's commitments on its eastern flank and in the Mediterranean region (see *Worst case #2*), although realistically there are insufficient resources available for any of the competing demands.

This scenario is highly interconnected with the other scenarios, as domestic political pressure to ease the sanctions regime against Moscow and Beijing – whose alternative corridors constitute the only remaining supply option – acts as a catalyst for *Worst case #3*. In the logic of the long cycle theory, the crisis points to a mechanism of hegemonic transition that deviates from the classical pattern. The hegemon's order-maintaining control over maritime public goods is not challenged by a clearly identifiable challenger but is delegitimised by non-state actors who acquire disruptive capabilities as a result of technological diffusion. For Europe and Germany, this implies that Western-style maritime globalisation is not necessarily undermined by competition from a symmetrical pole, but also by the cumulative power of denial wielded by dispersed actors. A security policy response that remains entrenched in the conventional logic of layered defence fails to address this threat scenario adequately.

#### **Worst case #5** **The end of transatlantic cohesion and the collapse of NATO**

As a result of the continued pursuit of a US foreign policy that, in several public statements, explicitly links the mutual defence commitment under Article 5 to the fulfilment of bilaterally negotiated economic, energy and mutual support commitments, the alliance undergoes a gradual yet substantial breakdown following a series of stress tests. Russia seizes on this signal to launch escalating provocations on the eastern flank, including drone overflights of Baltic and Polish territory, sabotage of data and energy cables in the Baltic Sea, and a border incident in the Suwałki Gap. Washington refuses to mount a collective response, citing national responsibilities, and at the same time resumes bilateral negotiations with Moscow on ending the Russo-Ukrainian war, without formally involving its European partners.





Within a few months, strategic unity disintegrates into three incompatible clusters: a North-East European alliance comprising Poland, the Baltic states and the Nordic members forms around the assumption of an immediate Russian threat; France and the United Kingdom strengthen their nuclear programmes and formulate an expanded deterrence doctrine for selected European partners; Germany embarks on a transactional normalisation of relations with Moscow (see *Worst case #3*). NATO formally remains in existence as a treaty organisation, but its integrated command structure loses credibility. Joint exercise formations are suspended, and Washington links nuclear sharing to concessions on industrial policy, the fulfilment of which is hardly justifiable in domestic political terms. China coordinates its build-up of maritime pressure in the western Pacific with the Russian escalation, so that the Malacca crisis outlined in *Worst case #4* coincides with the European alliance crisis. Within the EU, a pro-Russian alliance blocks any deepening of the Common Security and Defence Policy. Within eighteen months, the transatlantic alliance is functionally hollowed out as a collective security anchor.

For Germany, this results in four interlinked structural shifts. Firstly, the strategic framework that has formed the operational basis of German foreign and security policy since 1955 is no longer in place. The ability to compensate for national capability gaps through alliance, forward deployment and nuclear sharing is no longer available. The procurement projects decided upon during the *Zeitenwende* are, in their scope, designed on the assumption of a continuing American backstop function and do not cover the necessary capabilities in air defence, long-range precision strike, ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) architecture and maritime security. Secondly, Germany's position within the remaining European security frameworks is shifting from a proactive to a reactive role. Germany's ability to contribute to a Franco-British-led extended deterrence remains materially limited as long as the Bundeswehr is under-resourced in the aforementioned capability areas. Thirdly, the Federal Republic's vulnerability to economic blackmail is increasing to an extent that substantially restricts its regulatory sovereignty. The export-oriented business model is being squeezed between a protectionist US market, a politically instrumentalised Russian and Chinese market, and a fragmented European single market, whilst the vulnerability of maritime supply chains, as demonstrated in *Worst case #4*, is becoming a reality. Fourthly, this external erosion is turning into an endogenous spiral of loss of legitimacy for democratic institutions. Rising defence, energy and resilience costs are met by a population whose security expectations have for decades been met externally by the American promise of protection. The domestic

mobilisation of populist and pro-Russian forces (cf. *Worst case #3*) finds its structural justification in the manifesting security gap.

Within the logic of the long cycle theory, this scenario illustrates a special case of hegemonic transition. The focus here is not on the replacement of the declining hegemon by a rising pole, but rather on its orderly withdrawal from its own obligations to maintain the international order whilst retaining its material superiority. For Berlin, this leads to the analytically clear but politically almost impossible-to-communicate realisation that the transatlantic security architecture has outlived its usefulness as a guarantee, whilst a European alternative cannot be made operational within the required timeframe.

### Recommendations for Germany

The worst-case scenarios outlined above do not yield an exhaustive list of desirable individual measures for Germany, but rather a shift in priorities towards a resilience-oriented foreign and security policy. The key lesson is that Germany can no longer rely on the stability of those conditions (US reassurance, open sea lanes, functioning European decision-making structures, predictable supply chains and the ability to reach domestic political consensus) that have underpinned its security and economic model for decades. Recommendations for action must therefore not focus on how individual crises can be prevented, but rather on how Germany can remain capable of acting when several of these conditions of order erode simultaneously.

German defence planning can no longer be based on the implicit premise of a reliable American backstop. The assumption that Washington will provide leadership, deterrence, reconnaissance and escalation management in the event of a crisis is no longer tenable. What is decisive, rather, is the contingency in which the US hesitates, provides selective support or makes its contributions conditional. It follows that priority should be given not to symbolic large-scale projects, but to concrete capabilities such as integrated air and missile defence, long-range precision strike capabilities, a robust command, control and reconnaissance architecture, ammunition stockpiling, and the defence against massed drone and swarm attacks. The appropriate benchmark is not full strategic autonomy, but a credible minimum level of deterrence and sustainability in cooperation with partners.<sup>4</sup>

Resilience must be regarded as a key category of security policy, as modern crises simultaneously place strain on various cornerstones of state and societal stability: energy supply, supply chains, the information sphere, internal security and the capacity for political decision-making.

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<sup>4</sup> See "Deterrence", Metis Study No. 45 (November 2025).



A national resilience plan would need not only to protect critical infrastructure, but also to design it with redundancy and to involve key private-sector stakeholders before a crisis breaks out, through institutionalised crisis management teams and legally established cooperation mechanisms.<sup>5</sup> Following the same logic, 'de-risking' must be developed from a selective China strategy into a permanent economic security policy guideline that safeguards security-critical intermediate products, raw materials, data infrastructures and sales markets through minimum stockpiles, alternative suppliers and strategic procurement.

Geographically, this requires the reactivation of the 'southern flank' policy in the form of an inter-ministerial strategy with France, Italy, Spain and selected North African partners, with the aim of stabilisation, the protection of critical corridors, the disruption of jihadist networks and maritime surveillance. This must be achieved without the resource requirements competing with the protection of the eastern flank and a maritime Indo-Pacific presence. Domestically, the Bundeswehr must be prepared for the dual burden of situations where external alliance defence and internal administrative assistance may be required

simultaneously.<sup>6</sup> Homeland security, logistics, medical services and cyber defence must not come at the expense of operational readiness for alliance defence. Since adversaries tend to destabilise Western societies from within rather than through open military escalation, democratic resilience (the protection of democratic institutions and the rule of law, the information sphere, transparency rules, counter-espionage and anti-corruption measures, and political education based on the free democratic basic order) is at the heart of national security. It is crucial to justify such measures on a cross-party basis as a means of safeguarding the state's decision-making capacity.

The overarching recommendation is to transition from a security architecture based on stability, alliance routines and efficiency to one that measures political decisions not by their optimality under normal conditions, but by their sustainability under simultaneous external and internal pressures. The actual worst-case scenario lies not in the complete realisation of a single scenario, but in the institutional, financial and political inability to consider the identified individual risks in their entirety and to take timely countermeasures.

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<sup>5</sup> See "Total Defence", Metis Study No. 39 (March 2024).

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<sup>6</sup> See "Scenarios for the effects of climate change on security policy in Germany", Metis Study No. 36 (March 2023).

## IMPRINT

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Web: [metis.unibw.de](http://metis.unibw.de)

Bluesky: [@metis.unibw.de](https://bsky.app/profile/@metis.unibw.de)

### Author

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Dr. Konstantinos Tsetsos

[metis@unibw.de](mailto:metis@unibw.de)

### Creative Director

---

Christoph Ph. Nick, M.A.

[Zum Staunen\\*](http://zum-staunen.de) | [zum-staunen.de](http://zum-staunen.de)

### Copy editing, layout, design

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[Zum Staunen\\*](http://zum-staunen.de) — SciComm Creative Studio

### Image credits

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Cover:

"The world in turbulent times" prompt: inception-style, abstract rendering of planet earth with europe in the centre, with chaotic topographical layers, glitches, turbulences, vortices, broken connections between continents, catastrophic, dark mood, light on the far edge of the image | C. Nick, image created using Midjourney.

p. 3

"Chessboard" prompt: the chessboard, geopolitical chessboard, several pieces have been knocked over, some squares are already missing or breaking away, no clear players discernible | Author, image created using ChatGPT.

p. 8:

"Crossroads" prompt: a stony path crossroad; on the right a ruined Greek temple; on the left world war one frontline | Author, image created using ChatGPT.

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