Germany Acts

by George Friedman - May 27, 2025

Germany's decision to deploy a permanent force of 5,000 soldiers to Lithuania is extremely significant because it signals the next phase of a new geopolitical era. One of the most fundamental questions of this era is the extent to which the U.S. will limit its military and financial exposure to the global system. Toward that end, Washington has demanded that Europe assume primary responsibility for its own security and has made initial attempts to reshape the international economic order that had been in place since World War II to facilitate the change. We have been waiting to see how Europe reacts.

The German deployment is the first response. The size of the deployment is not designed to resist a full Russian attack, of course, but it is meant to trigger a massive response in Europe and instill a sense of caution in Russia. With Germany having thus created a concrete military commitment in Europe, the question now is whether the deployment is the first of many European actions or simply a solitary act. As I have argued, Europe is merely the name of the Continent, a landmass slightly larger than the continental U.S. comprising 44 sovereign states. A coordinated European response means one thing; 44 individual responses would mean quite another. Similarly, it will be important to see not how the entirety of NATO responds but how the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Poland – the alliance's strongest and most geographically relevant members – respond. Though it remains unlikely that they would permanently place military forces in positions to block a westward Russian attack, the Ukraine war has made the prospect possible.

But even if Germany's was a solitary act, it is a critical shift in Europe. The country has been a pariah state, albeit to a decreasing extent, since World War II – arguably, since World War I. It initiated combat in both wars, against countries that are now members of NATO, against countries now outside the alliance and, crucially, against the Soviet Union. It emerged from World War II not as a sovereign nation but as a divided territory, occupied by both the West and the Soviet Union until the 1990s. After it was reunited, it quickly became the Continent's economic center of gravity. And though its economic weight makes it the first among equals in the EU, it has been careful to avoid asserting military power. Europe has a long memory, and for centuries, its history was the history of all-against-all warfare. Germany's decision to deploy troops in Europe – which has been welcomed by the U.S. as well as other European countries – violates its commitment to modest ambitions for European leadership. Put simply, the deployment to Lithuania could presage the reemergence of

Germany as a geopolitical force. Had the U.K., France or Poland made the military commitment, we likely wouldn't bat an eye. But it was Germany that did, so now Europe will have to consider not just what the U.S. wants but also what Germany may become. It's possible that the fear of German power is obsolete, but I suspect it isn't.

Germany to Russia

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There is, meanwhile, the Russian question that must also be considered. The decision to send troops to Lithuania was well thought out strategically. Lithuania borders Latvia, Poland and Belarus; it has no border with Russia or Ukraine. In the event, say, Russia moves rapidly to occupy Ukraine and then retake the nations that had been part of the Soviet Union, or moves to reclaim influence in the European satellites it once occupied, a German armored brigade based permanently in Lithuania would raise the stakes. Again, a single German brigade wouldn't stop the full weight of the Russian military, but the attack on Lithuania through Belarus would raise the risk of a NATO, and thus U.S., intervention. It's a prime location to place troops and drive home to Russia the risks expansionism

would carry. At the same time, neither Germany nor Lithuania borders Ukraine, so Moscow can't see this as a military threat to Ukraine, nor can it threaten Lithuania without first showing its hand to other countries. This gives NATO, Europe and the United States time to react.

Germany may have also provided a blueprint for European self-defense: Deploying troops into forward positions near but not on the Russian border will show that actions beyond Ukraine will give European countries a chance to act quickly while still giving NATO options to respond. (As I have said before, it may seem crazy to think that Russia would venture past Ukraine today, but countries don't make long-term strategic plans hoping for the best.)

The U.S. decision to recuse itself from European security has created a crisis on the Continent. Fortunately for Europe, U.S. measures to that end have been so far rhetorical; for all its bluster, the U.S. has not withdrawn troops from NATO, and it has yet to clarify the precise nature of its comments. Still, nations are nations, and they will act in their own interest as such. An alliance like NATO exists only when nations see the world in the same way. Germany's deployment could force Europe to decide what to do – and not deciding is a decision. The shock to Europe has generated the kind of response it wanted. Germany may be likely to be emulated, but given history, it is unlikely to be allowed to lead. The Europeans have long memories.

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