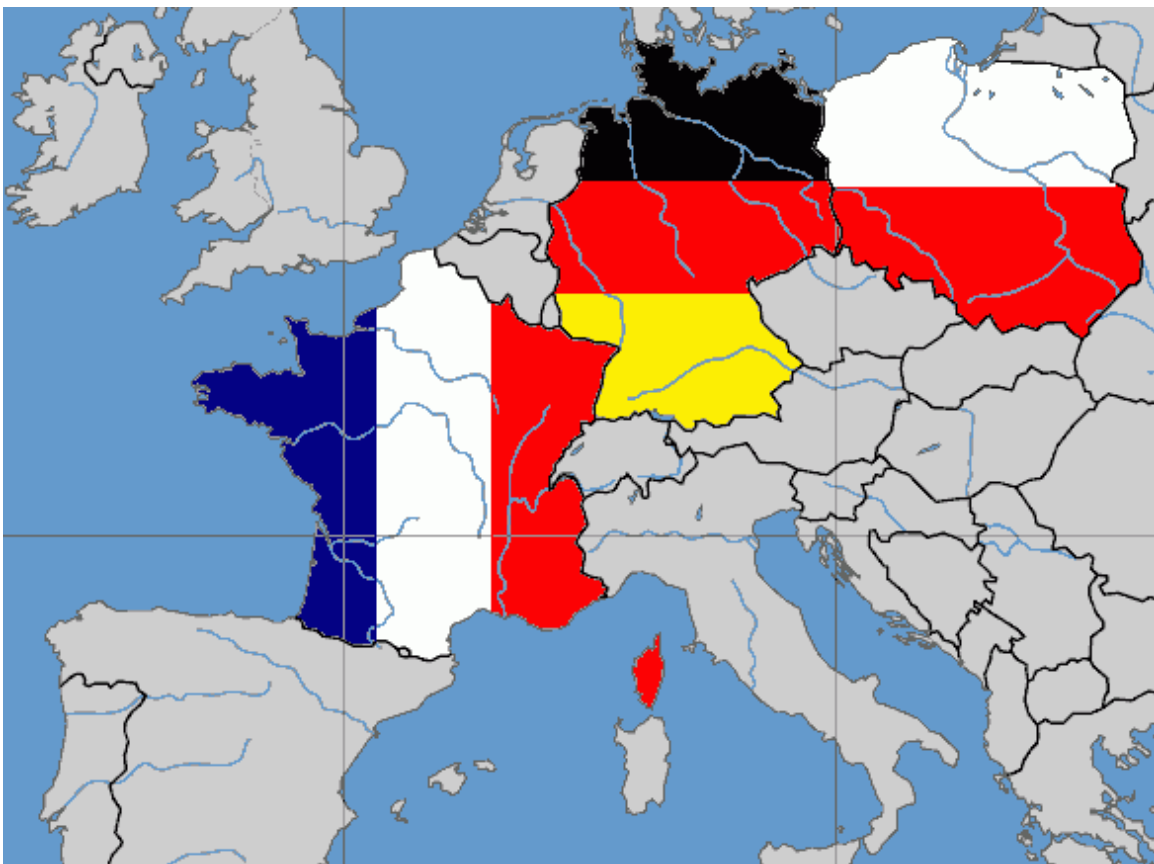


Can the Weimar Triangle Re-Emerge as a Pillar of European Security?



Symposium for Young Researchers on Defense, Security, Foreign Policy, and Diplomacy

Methodological Preface

This short paper is an adapted synthesis of a more extensive Applied Research Project (PRA) conducted during the second year of my Master's degree at ISIT, Panthéon-Assas University (Grande École), in cooperation with EuroDéfense-France. The original research was carried out collectively by a group of four postgraduate students (**Lucas Berrien, Michèle Embinga-Bessacque, Laetitia Guillas, and Panagiota Pagoni**) under the academic guidance of **Denis Verret, Françoise Lépine, Claude Roche, and Yves Thouvenin** from EuroDéfense-France.

The PRA included a substantial empirical component based on expert interviews. The team had the opportunity to conduct in-depth discussions with:

- **Lukasz Jurczyszyn**, First Secretary of the Embassy of Poland in France
- **Florence H. Gabbe**, Head of the "Regions, Europe and Neighbourhood" Unit at the Franco-German Youth Office
- **General Nicolas Richoux**, Brigadier General (Second Section of the General Officers' Corps), defence consultant for LCI, and historian
- **Martin Koopmann**, Director of the Genshagen Foundation and expert on Franco-German relations and trilateral cooperation between France, Germany, and Poland

Their insights proved essential for understanding the dynamics, challenges, and potential of the Weimar Triangle in today's evolving European security environment.

The present text therefore draws heavily upon the conclusions, data, and analyses generated within this collaborative research project, while updating certain elements where necessary to reflect more recent developments. It seeks to offer a concise and policy-oriented contribution in the context of the ELIAMEP Symposium for Young Researchers on Defence, Security, Foreign Policy, and Diplomacy.

Table of Contents

Methodological Preface	1
Table of Contents.....	2
Introduction	3
I. Genesis and Structural Tensions of the Weimar Triangle	4
A. Origins and ambitions of the Weimar Triangle	4
B. Structural Handicaps and Initial Asymmetries.....	4
C. Strategic Distortions and Recurrent Tensions	5
II. A New Strategic Context: Europe in Transformation and the Rise of Poland	6
A. Poland’s Growing Soft Power and Strategic Ambition	6
B. Changing International Context: Alliances and Rivalries	6
C. Themes of Convergence and Divergence in Europe	7
III. Conditions for Renewed Strategic Cooperation Across Defence, Energy, Diplomacy and European Governance.....	7
A. Impact of Political and Geopolitical Dynamics: Optimistic and Pessimistic Scenarios	7
B. Behavioural Commitments: A Key Factor in the Triangle’s Evolution	8
Conclusion	9
Bibliography	10

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally reshaped Europe's security environment, revealing the extent to which the post-Cold War order had been destabilised. Against this backdrop, renewed attention has turned to the Weimar Triangle, the informal platform uniting France, Germany and Poland, as a potential mechanism for strengthening European security cooperation. Created in 1991, the Triangle originally served to support the German-Polish rapprochement and accompany Poland's democratic, economic and institutional transition toward Euro-Atlantic structures, notably NATO and the European Union¹. Although it contributed symbolically to Poland's Western integration, culminating in NATO accession in 1999 and EU membership in 2004, the format lacked formal structures, strategic vision, and sustained political investment. By 2016–2023, the absence of high-level trilateral meetings demonstrated the extent to which diverging national priorities and political tensions had rendered the Triangle largely dormant.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine, however, marked a turning point. In March 2022, the foreign ministers of the three countries met in Łódź to jointly condemn Russian aggression and reaffirm their commitment to supporting Ukraine, an event widely interpreted as a symbolic revival of the format². At the same time, significant shifts were underway within the three members themselves. Germany announced its *Zeitenwende*, signalling a departure from decades of strategic restraint; Poland emerged as a frontline security actor, investing nearly 5% of its GDP in defence and positioning itself as a pillar of NATO's eastern flank; and France, recalibrating its global posture, renewed its focus on European defence and collective security. These converging transformations, combined with growing uncertainty surrounding the long-term trajectory of U.S. engagement in Europe, have created what several experts describe as a “window of opportunity” for trilateral strategic coordination³.

The central question, then, is the following: *How can the Weimar Triangle, uniting France, Germany, and Poland, overcome historical tensions and divergent priorities to build effective cooperation and strengthen European security in the face of today's geopolitical challenges?* Addressing this question requires a three-part approach. First, the analysis retraces the origins of the Triangle and the structural imbalances that limited its strategic potential. Second, it assesses how recent geopolitical transformations, most notably the war in Ukraine and the rise of Poland as a central security actor, affect the prospects for trilateral alignment. Finally, it identifies the organisational, political and behavioural conditions necessary for the Triangle to function as a coherent strategic actor capable of contributing meaningfully to European defence, diplomacy and energy security.

¹ Interview with Lukasz Jurczyszyn. (2024, October 21).

² Interview with Nicolas Richoux. (2025, January 13).

³ Interview with Martin Koopmann. (2025, February 14).

I. Genesis and Structural Tensions of the Weimar Triangle

A. Origins and ambitions of the Weimar Triangle

The creation of the Weimar Triangle in August 1991 took place against the backdrop of the profound geopolitical reconfiguration that followed the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet bloc, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the German reunification in 1990 dramatically reshaped Europe's security environment, raising urgent questions about how to stabilise Central and Eastern Europe during its transition. Within this context, Poland sought irreversible anchoring in Western political, economic, and security institutions, while France and Germany sought to ensure that the post-communist vacuum in Central Europe did not produce new zones of instability.

It was with these objectives in mind that the foreign ministers of France (Roland Dumas), Germany (Hans-Dietrich Genscher), and Poland (Krzysztof Skubiszewski) met in Weimar on 29 August 1991 to launch an informal trilateral dialogue grounded in political cooperation, reconciliation, and support for Poland's Western integration. The ministers agreed on three priorities: stabilising Central and Eastern Europe by gradually integrating the post-communist countries into Western institutions, consolidating German-Polish reconciliation after decades of mistrust, and supporting Poland's democratic, economic, and institutional transition with a view to future EU and NATO membership. As Martin Koopmann emphasised in his interview, the Triangle was conceived as an "open cooperation framework" rather than a formal organisation, avoiding binding commitments or a permanent secretariat.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Triangle largely fulfilled its initial purpose. It acted as a political vehicle through which France and Germany accompanied Poland's Western integration, culminating in EU and NATO accession in 2004. Yet this achievement also effectively exhausted the Triangle's founding mission, leaving the format without a clearly defined strategic role thereafter.

B. Structural Handicaps and Initial Asymmetries

The post-Cold War years exposed foundational imbalances. Germany rapidly became Poland's dominant economic partner, while France remained diplomatically distant, oriented toward other regions. This created a two-speed triangle: deep Franco-German coordination on one side, ad hoc Franco-Polish ties on the other⁴. That imbalance made trilateral cooperation episodic rather than systemic. The 2016–2022 period saw no top-level summits, a diplomatic vacuum reflecting both political disinterest and institutional inertia.

Strategically, the three members diverged sharply. Poland's security doctrine is rooted in NATO and its bilateral alliance with the U.S., shaped by historic memory and geographic exposure to Russian aggression. Poland's defence spending reached approximately 4.2 % of GDP in 2024, one of the highest rates among

⁴ Scharping, p. 538.

NATO members and the highest in Central and Western Europe⁵. France, in contrast, continues to advocate for European strategic autonomy, favouring instruments such as the EU Strategic Compass, while resisting excessive reliance on American guarantees. France's defence budget in 2024 stood at 2.06 % of GDP, with ambitions to raise it further⁶. Germany, caught between Atlanticist commitments and a historically pacifist strategic culture, pledged a "Zeitenwende" in 2022 and increased its defence expenditure sharply (to 2.12 % of GDP in 2024), though observers note that its full strategic-capability shift is still underway⁷.

These strategic misalignments have consistently undermined joint initiatives. In defence procurement, Poland has repeatedly favoured U.S. and South Korean equipment, as illustrated by the Caracal episode in 2016, when Warsaw abruptly abandoned negotiations with Airbus in favour of American suppliers. At the same time, France and Germany have excluded Poland from key programmes such as the MGCS tank project, a point recalled by Jacek Tarociński during the Synopia seminar of 10 December 2024⁸. Warsaw has further accentuated this divergence through massive extra-European acquisitions, notably 50 FA-50 aircraft, F-35 fighters, nearly 1,000 K2 Black Panther tanks and over 600 K9 Thunder howitzers, reinforcing its operational capacities but limiting possibilities for trilateral industrial convergence⁹.

C. Strategic Distortions and Recurrent Tensions

Beyond strategic divergences, the Weimar Triangle has also been weakened by the accumulation of bilateral political crises. The rise of the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland, briefly in 2005-2007 and again from 2015-2023, marked a decisive shift toward a nationalist, conservative, and sovereigntist orientation. Deeply sceptical of the political integration projects promoted by Paris and Berlin, PiS consistently prioritised NATO and its bilateral partnership with the United States, thereby reducing incentives for deeper European defence cooperation. These internal political shifts progressively eroded the diplomatic foundations of the Triangle.

From 2016 onward, the institutional dynamic of the format deteriorated sharply. The absence of regular Weimar summits between 2016 and 2023 illustrates how political disagreements, ranging from rule-of-law disputes and migration policy to differing views on the role of the United States in European security, created a prolonged diplomatic decoupling. These accumulated frictions made sustained trilateral dialogue increasingly difficult and contributed to the Triangle's semi-dormant status throughout this period.

Yet, as Martin Koopmann emphasises, certain forms of cooperation persisted below the political level. Regional and societal actors continued to work together effectively, including during coordinated

⁵ SIPRI, *World Military Expenditure 2024* (2025).

⁶ Clapp, *Defence Capabilities and Spending in the EU* (2025).

⁷ Subran et al., *What to Watch 2025* (2025).

⁸ Synopia, *Triangle de Weimar Seminar* (2024).

⁹ Interview with Nicolas Richoux (13 January 2025).

responses to natural disasters in Germany. This demonstrates that, despite political tensions, a functional basis for trilateral cooperation still exists.

II. A New Strategic Context: Europe in Transformation and the Rise of Poland

A. Poland's Growing Soft Power and Strategic Ambition

Since the Łódź meeting of 1 March 2022, the Weimar Triangle has undergone a genuine revival, shifting from a largely symbolic forum to a platform for strategic coordination in response to the shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The joint declaration condemning Russian aggression marked this turning point and reaffirmed the three states' commitment to supporting Ukraine and strengthening trilateral cooperation on defence and security. In this reconfigured environment, the Triangle now seeks to operationalise its role through three core axes: regular diplomatic dialogue among heads of state and foreign ministries, trilateral coordination on defence-related projects, and deeper engagement on energy security.

Yet experts warn that this renewed ambition remains fragile. General Nicolas Richoux emphasised that the format has rarely produced concrete outcomes, despite its usefulness in "anchoring Poland to democratic values." Łukasz Maślanka (OSW) likewise cautioned against "empty slogans" and stressed the need for tangible achievements to justify the Triangle's strategic relevance. During the December 2024 seminar, both Ambassador Jan Emeryk Rościszewski and Aurélien Lechevallier underlined that, amid growing uncertainty surrounding U.S. policy, the Weimar Triangle should serve as a structuring instrument of European defence policy and a key driver of the EU's pursuit of greater strategic autonomy¹⁰.

Within this evolving landscape, Poland's growing military strength and assertive political posture provide new momentum: Warsaw, no longer a mere recipient of Western support, increasingly seeks to shape Europe's strategic priorities and cohesion.

B. Changing International Context: Alliances and Rivalries

The international context in which the Weimar Triangle operates has been profoundly reshaped by the resurgence of U.S. unpredictability under the new wave of Trumpism. During the seminar held on 10 December 2024, Ambassador Jan Emeryk Rościszewski underscored that the volatility of American foreign policy reinforces the need for a more strategically autonomous Europe, a point echoed by several participants. Yet this uncertainty has simultaneously enabled Poland to consolidate its bilateral partnership with the United States. Warsaw has expanded military cooperation through major acquisitions, such as F-35 fighter jets and Patriot missile systems, and through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which established a permanent U.S. military presence in Poznań. These developments, crowned by the 2024 activation of the Aegis Ashore missile-defence base at Redzikowo,

¹⁰ Synopia, *Triangle de Weimar Seminar* (2024).

reflect Poland's pragmatic assessment of regional threats and its reliance on Washington as the cornerstone of deterrence.

However, this approach exposes structural divergences within the Triangle. While France and Germany advocate for a stronger European defence capacity to reduce dependence on the U.S., Poland continues to prioritise NATO and its bilateral ties with Washington. Analysts such as Martin Koopmann and Ronja Kempin note that these differences complicate trilateral alignment, even as the war in Ukraine prompts all three countries to reconsider Europe's long-term security architecture. Despite these tensions, Poland's growing influence, bolstered by its 2025 EU Council Presidency, positioned it to shape debates on European defence funding and the future of transatlantic relations.

C. Themes of Convergence and Divergence in Europe

The thematic landscape shaping convergence and divergence within the Weimar Triangle is defined by fundamentally different strategic cultures, particularly in security, defence, energy, and industrial policy. Poland's comprehensive approach to security, rooted in historical experience and acute threat perception, prioritises military readiness, diversified energy supplies, and strong alignment with the United States. As General Nicolas Richoux notes, Poland's heightened sensitivity to Russian aggression explains its emphasis on rapid rearmament and operational commitments, including early deliveries of tanks and artillery systems to Ukraine. France and Germany share support for Ukraine, yet diverge on the modalities and intensity of military assistance, with internal political debates in Berlin tempering its approach.

Energy policy constitutes another fault line. France and Poland view nuclear power as a pillar of long-term autonomy, whereas Germany's nuclear phase-out and reliance on fossil fuels complicate trilateral coordination. This structural divergence limits prospects for a unified energy strategy. Yet potential areas of convergence remain, including satellite surveillance, air-defence cooperation, and discussions surrounding Poland's possible participation in future European industrial programmes. Ultimately, progress within the Triangle depends on its ability to reconcile differing threat perceptions and strategic priorities while capitalising on shared interests in European security.

III. Conditions for Renewed Strategic Cooperation Across Defence, Energy, Diplomacy and European Governance

A. Impact of Political and Geopolitical Dynamics: Optimistic and Pessimistic Scenarios

The future of the Weimar Triangle will be shaped by domestic political developments in France, Germany and Poland, as well as broader geopolitical dynamics such as the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the trajectory of U.S. engagement in Europe. These factors give rise to two contrasting scenarios that illustrate the conditions under which trilateral cooperation could either consolidate or fragment.

In an optimistic scenario, political convergence emerges across the three capitals, enabling the Triangle to function as a strategic driver of European autonomy. A pro-European orientation in Paris, Berlin and Warsaw would allow for greater continuity in foreign and defence policy, reinforcing joint initiatives on capability development, defence industrial integration and energy security. In this configuration, Poland plays a constructive role in regional security, France continues to push for a European defence pillar, and Germany provides political and financial weight. The end of large-scale fighting in Ukraine, combined with a gradual U.S. strategic rebalancing towards the Indo-Pacific, would further incentivise Europeans to assume greater responsibility, positioning the Triangle as a core instrument for implementing the EU Strategic Compass and strengthening collective deterrence¹¹.

In a pessimistic scenario, political shifts empower Eurosceptic or far-right forces, weakening the foundations of trilateral trust. Diverging threat perceptions, continued dependence on U.S. security guarantees, and growing intra-European divisions could paralyse the format. A prolonged or escalatory conflict in Ukraine, coupled with a reduction of U.S. military support, would increase pressure on Europe precisely when the Triangle is least capable of coordinated action. In such a context, the Weimar framework risks drifting into irrelevance, exacerbating fragmentation within the EU and undermining efforts to build a coherent European security architecture¹².

B. Behavioural Commitments: A Key Factor in the Triangle’s Evolution

The functioning of the Weimar Triangle rests less on formal treaties than on behavioural commitments that shape how France, Germany and Poland cooperate. Three informal norms emerge as crucial. First, the “1×3, 3×2” principle underlines that a resilient trilateral format presupposes solid bilateral relations between each pair. When one side of the triangle weakens, as during the 2016–2023 period of Polish political disengagement, the entire structure is destabilised. This logic implies sustained diplomatic investment, continuous communication and active management of bilateral asymmetries.

Second, there is an implicit commitment to systematic inclusion of all three members on major strategic dossiers, particularly in defence and industrial policy. While bilateral initiatives should not be discouraged, repeated Franco-German decisions without prior consultation of Warsaw, for instance on MGCS or SCAF, risk fuelling distrust and undermining trilateral legitimacy. A soft norm of mandatory consultation on key EU initiatives, such as a European Defence White Paper or defence-industrial policy, would strengthen internal cohesion and increase the Triangle’s credibility in Brussels.

Third, a flexible “Weimar+” approach allows the format to associate other partners (e.g. the UK, Italy, Spain, the Baltic states or the Netherlands) on specific issues such as cyber security, disinformation or EU enlargement, while preserving the trilateral core. Here, the role of civil society, youth exchanges and regional partnerships is central: projects like “Europe begins in your town”¹³ and existing Franco-German–

¹¹ Interview with Martin Koopmann (14 February 2025).

¹² Interview with Martin Koopmann (14 February 2025).

¹³ Interview with Florence H. Gabbe (12 December 2024).

Polish regional networks illustrate how bottom-up cooperation can anchor the Triangle socially and territorially.

The debate on institutionalisation opposes the need for continuity and high-level engagement to the risk of rigidification and perceptions of a hegemonic “directorate”. A hybrid solution appears most plausible: annual summits and thematic ministerial meetings, a light but predictable agenda, and concrete trilateral projects (defence capabilities, SMRs, green hydrogen, aerospace and space) supported by a dedicated Weimar fund, rather than a heavy new bureaucracy.

Conclusion

Three decades after its creation, and three years into Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, the Weimar Triangle is re-emerging as a potentially valuable instrument for strengthening Europe’s strategic sovereignty. The unprecedented uncertainty surrounding the transatlantic relationship, coupled with the fragmentation of EU decision-making, highlights the need for formats capable of generating convergence among key European states. The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that, despite long phases of stagnation, the Triangle retains significant political, strategic and societal potential. Its value lies not in replacing EU structures, but in complementing them: providing an agile, intergovernmental space where France, Germany and Poland can negotiate expectations, align strategic priorities and generate initiatives capable of radiating to the wider Union.

Ultimately, the Weimar Triangle’s relevance will depend on its ability to act as a catalyst rather than a directorate, amplifying European strategic coordination without creating new dividing lines. If France, Germany and Poland succeed in transforming behavioural commitments into sustained political will, the Triangle can evolve into a credible engine of European security and resilience at a moment when the continent urgently requires predictable leadership and pragmatic cooperation.

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