



Fachbereich WD 2

The Bundestag's role in the foreign, development, and defence policies of Germany

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1. Introduction

The following explores the role of the German Bundestag in three “external” policies of the Federal Republic of Germany: foreign policy, development policy, and defence policy. Historically, international trade would have been a fourth external policy, but competency for trade has been transferred to the European Union. The German parliament plays a vital and significant role in the external relations of Germany on several levels.

2. Parliamentary dependency of the Federal Government

As in most other countries, foreign policy in Germany is the responsibility of the government. The Federal Government consists of the Chancellor and the cabinet, i.e., the ministers.

Unlike in presidential systems, however, the Chancellor is not elected directly by the voters, but by the Bundestag, and has, with one exception, always been a member of parliament. Since the Chancellor is elected by parliament, he or she must have at least a relative majority in parliament (in theory, minority governments are possible, but in practice, this has never occurred on the federal level). All policies of the Federal Government are therefore, at least in theory, supported by a parliamentary majority. Government and parliament are also connected by the office of “parliamentary state secretary” (*Parlamentarischer Staatssekretär*), members of the Bundestag serving as members of a Federal Ministry’s staff. They can act as deputies of the respective minister. Originally conceived as roles allowing members of parliament to prepare for a possible future mandate as ministers, these positions serve to connect and to ensure cooperation between the government and the parliamentary majority. This model in which executive and legislative are not clearly separated but interconnected (with the legislature, being elected by the people, in the supreme position) is called *Gewaltenverschränkung* in German (lit. *intertwining of powers*).

3. Parliamentary committees, parliamentary oversight, and the power of the purse

At least five permanent parliamentary committees deal with Germany’s external relations: the [Committee on Foreign Affairs](#), the [Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid](#), the [Committee on Economic Cooperation and Development](#), the [Committee on European Union Affairs](#), and the [Defence Committee](#).

Each committee can create sub-committees dealing with specific aspects of policy; in the current legislative period, the Committee on Foreign Affairs has four such sub-committees (Subcommittee on the United Nations, International Organisations and International Order, Subcommittee on Arms and Proliferation Control, Non-Proliferation and International Disarmament, Subcommittee on Foreign Cultural and Educational Policy, Subcommittee on Crisis Prevention, Strategic Foresight, Stabilisation and Peace Promotion).

The Foreign Affairs, the European Union Affairs and the Defence Committee are among the few whose existence is mandated by the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), the German constitution: [Article 45a \(1\)](#) stipulates that the Bundestag must establish a Committee on Foreign Affairs and one for Defence. [Art. 45](#) requires parliament to create a Committee on European Union Affairs.

Committees as well as the plenary can summon ministers or their deputies, and both the political groups within parliament as well as individual members have the right to pose questions to the

government which it must answer. When it comes to defence and foreign policy as well as to foreign intelligence, there are certain “core areas of governmental prerogatives” where this obligation to answer (in effect, parliamentary scrutiny of the government) ends. For example, the Federal Government will neither deny nor confirm if there are nuclear weapons stationed on German territory, even whilst confirming that Germany is part of NATO nuclear sharing.

Apart from the scrutiny parliament exercises over the actions of the Federal Government, the core competencies of the Bundestag include the power of the purse, i.e., its right to draw up the budget and approve funds (which is especially relevant for development aid measures and military procurements, as these are often relatively specific), to ratify treaties (as laid down in [Art. 59 \(2\)](#) of the constitution), to participate in certain legislative acts of the European Union and to vote on deployments of the Federal Armed Forces (*Bundeswehr*).

4. War and peace

While the constitution does not explicitly mention any “declaration of war”, it provides for two special constitutional/legal states: the “state of tension” (*Spannungsfall*, laid down in [Art. 80a](#)) and the “state of defence” (*Verteidigungsfall*, laid down in [Art. 115a](#)), the latter of which is, for all intents and purposes, war.

Both cases must be voted upon by the Bundestag with a majority of at least two thirds and have special legal consequences (e.g., the possible curtailing of certain civil rights, the acceleration of some legal processes to speed up military readiness, the suspension of elections for the duration of the state of defence, or the transfer of military command from the Minister of Defence to the Chancellor).

Therefore, the German government cannot declare war. Due to German history, these decisions are the sole prerogative of parliament. It is also parliament that must declare the end of the state of tension or of the state of defence.

As to other forms of military deployments abroad (i.e., NATO or EU missions): while the German constitution does not explicitly say so – and actually does not at all mention the deployment of the armed forces abroad – , the Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*), in a [landmark decision in 1994](#) decided that all military deployments of the Bundeswehr outside of German territory must be subject to a decision of the Bundestag. This applies both initially (before the mission begins) as well as regularly (to prolong the mission). Every foreign deployment must be voted upon individually and there can be no “blank checks”, i.e., the Bundestag cannot simply make a law that authorises the government to deploy the Bundeswehr whenever or wherever it sees fit. The government must provide regular information to parliament on all deployments. These can, but need not necessarily, be public (the Defence Committee being one of the few committees that is not open to the public).

These rules do not apply to each and every deployment of every member of the armed forces. For example, when Germany sent some 15 soldiers to Greenland upon request by the Kingdom of Denmark in January of 2026, this was a consultative trip, not a deployment in the sense of the 1994 decision.

In the case of any special military operation, the same principles apply as to all deployments abroad. However, in certain emergencies, it might be inevitable to deploy Bundeswehr personnel immediately, without consulting parliament beforehand. This has been the case with some operations of the (now defunct) Crisis Reaction Forces (*Krisenreaktionskräfte*) of the Bundeswehr. In this case, constitutional jurisprudence allows for the Bundestag to give its assent retroactively. The Bundestag must be informed of the operation as soon as possible.

5. The Bundestag's role in the negotiation and ratification of international treaties

Negotiations of treaties are the sole prerogative of the government, as laid down in [Art. 32 \(1\)](#) of the constitution. While not specified in the constitution, the Federal Constitutional Court has established that the Bundestag must be informed about treaty negotiations in a timely manner and not only at the stage of ratification, so that parliament can voice its opinions and be given the chance to influence negotiations.

Parliament does not negotiate treaties, but individual members and political groups can voice opinions. One recent example: when the European Parliament unexpectedly referred the EU-Mercosur Agreement to the European Court of Justice with the votes of German MEPs in January 2026, these events were discussed in the plenary of the Bundestag.

Parliament does, however, play a vital role in the ratification of the most important treaties.

The Bundestag must ratify a treaty if

- it affects the international relations of the Federal Republic,
- it affects matters of federal legislation,
- it changes the fundamental treaties of the European Union, and if
- it's a treaty of accession of a state to the European Union.

Whereas the first two cases are laid down in [Art. 59 \(2\) of the Basic Law](#) (the German constitution), the other two cases are prescribed by EU law in [Art.49 TEU](#) (“...ratification by all the contracting States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements”).

Within the German constitutional framework, ratification occurs in the form of a simple law which is usually initiated by the Federal Government. The draft is read three times and debated at least once in the Bundestag, voted upon, and, in case of passing, referred to the Bundesrat (the upper house of the German parliament) where it is voted upon again. Upon passing the Bundesrat, the Federal President signs the treaty and publishes it in the Federal Law Gazette (*Bundesgesetzblatt*), which concludes the ratification process.

6. Parliament's *political* influence through the power of the purse

Parliament alone has the *power of the purse* and decides on the allocation of the federal budget. The annual budget law gives parliament – and in particular, the [Budget Committee](#) – a potentially huge influence on all aspects of government. In respect to external policies, this influence

is, in practice, stronger in the field of development aid, which in Germany is administered by a separate federal ministry and not the [Foreign Office](#). Due to the makeup of the budget of the [Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development](#), parliament can exert a more granular influence here. For example, it might decide to give measures designed to fight hunger a bigger budget at the expense of other measures. The budget of the Foreign Office is less about financing specific measures than about financing the ministry and Germany's embassies, hence the influence through the budget is weaker here.

When it comes to defence, parliament certainly exerts a strong influence. All military [acquisitions exceeding costs of more than 25 million euros](#) must be voted upon by the Budget Committee and the Defence Committee. This applies to a large number of military procurements. Hence, the rapporteurs for Budget Plan 14 (Defence) can influence decisions by giving preference to some acquisitions and not to others. For example, the Committee might indicate that it would only agree to the procurement of a navy vessel if it had certain specifications and capabilities.

7. The Bundestag and arms exports

The Federal Government informs parliament about Germany's arms exports in a mandatory annual report which is discussed both in plenary and in the relevant committees.

In this context, reference should also be made to the aforementioned Bundestag Subcommittee on Arms and Proliferation Control, Non-Proliferation and International Disarmament ([Unterausschuss Rüstungs- und Proliferationskontrolle, Nichtverbreitung und internationale Abrüstung](#)), which deals with political developments in the field of non-proliferation and disarmament.

8. The Bundestag and the federal intelligence services

Foreign intelligence can be seen as part of the wider security policy of a state.

Since 1956, there exists a parliamentary body tasked with scrutiny of the work of Germany's intelligence services. Since 1999, this commission is called [Parliamentary Oversight Panel](#) (*Parlamentarisches Kontrollgremium*, PKGr), and since 2009, its existence is grounded in the German constitution (Art.45d GG). The commission is tasked with the scrutiny of the three intelligence services of the Federal Republic of Germany (the 16 states each have their own internal intelligence services tasked with observing anti-constitutional activities). These are the Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND; the foreign intelligence service), the Military Counterintelligence Service (*Militärischer Abschirmdienst*, MAD) and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, BfV). At the beginning of each legislative period, the Bundestag votes on the number of members of the PKGr and the members themselves. Unlike other parliamentary commissions, the PKGr continues to exist and work until a new PKGr has been voted on to ensure uninterrupted parliamentary oversight of the intelligence services. This means that until such a vote has taken place, even former members of the Bundestag who have not been re-elected continue to serve as members of the PKGr.

The Federal Government is obliged by law to report to the PKGr on the general activities of the intelligence services and about matters of special importance. The PKGr can demand further reports.

Besides the PKGr, which is probably the smallest of all the Bundestag's panels and commissions by number of members, parliament as a whole, committees, political groups, or individual members can also demand reports or ask questions about the intelligence services' activities. Obviously, not all replies may be made public.

9. Parliamentary diplomacy

Apart from legal and institutional aspects, the Bundestag can play a significant role in Germany's external relations in a number of other ways. It can engage in dialogue and cultivate contacts between parliaments and with international organisations. Committees regularly travel to other countries to gather information which gives the delegations the opportunity to engage in parliamentary diplomacy. However, there are numerous other aspects of parliamentary diplomacy which will be covered in the next sections.

9.1. Friendship groups

There are currently 47 [parliamentary friendship groups](#). They organise interested members of the Bundestag in either one country (such as France, Germany's closest European ally and friend) or a group of countries (for example, the Baltic States) or a region (for example, the countries of the Pacific). Their purpose is to promote ongoing dialogue with the parliamentary institutions of one or more other countries. To this end, they seek to hold talks as often as possible with politicians and other representatives from their partner states, exchanging information, discussing opinions and sharing experiences. For example, they might invite the ambassador of the partner country, or representatives of that country's civil society in order to gain insight and foster good relations. Once a legislative period, they may also travel to the partner country.

These groups may be created if a sufficient number of members from different political groups requests it, and upon approval from the Council of Elders (*Ältestenrat*), the body tasked with ensuring the smooth inner workings of parliament and which is comprised of the President and her deputies, the leaders of the political groups, and experienced members of the Bundestag.

In addition to these groups of members of the Bundestag, there are friendship groups of the members of the parliamentary administration that connect them to the administrations of other parliaments. Given that the administration's staff – unlike the elected representatives – serve many years, if not decades, these oft-overlooked groups may play a vital role in establishing and maintaining informal, but longstanding contacts and channels of communication.

9.2. The role of the President of the Bundestag in parliamentary diplomacy

The office of the President of the Bundestag is (not formally, but traditionally and in practice) the second-highest ranking office in the Federal Republic, after the Federal President and before the Chancellor. Therefore, the President of the Bundestag and his/her deputies can and often do represent Germany. When foreign heads of state or government visit Germany, they are often received at the Bundestag by the President. Not being a member of the Federal Government, the President has considerable freedom in any representative duties she/he decides to take on and is supported in this by a protocol division.

The President may also visit other countries and their parliaments – for example, in February 2026, President Julia Klöckner visited Israel, where she was received by her counterpart from the Knesset.

10. International parliamentary assemblies

Members of the Bundestag are members or delegates of the following parliamentary assemblies:

- the Inter-Parliamentary Union ([IPU](#)), an organisation created in 1889, which today comprises the parliaments of 180 countries and 15 associate members;
- the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ([PACE](#));
- the NATO Parliamentary Assembly ([NATO PA](#));
- the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ([OSCE PA](#));
- the Interparliamentary Conference ([IPC](#));
- the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference ([BSPC](#));
- the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation ([PABSEC](#));
- the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean ([PA-UfM](#));
- the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly ([AIPA](#));
- the [Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly](#) (*Assemblée Parlementaire Franco-Allemande / Deutsch-Französische Parlamentarische Versammlung*), a body comprised of 50 members of the Bundestag and 50 members of the Assemblée nationale. The assembly is based on the [Franco-German Parliamentary Agreement](#) (*Deutsch-Französisches Parlamentsabkommen / Accord parlementaire franco-allemand*) of 2019. It exercises oversight over the execution of the [Elysée Treaty](#) of 1963 (the Franco-German treaty of friendship and cooperation) by the two governments, observes the work of the Franco-German councils of ministers and the Franco-German Defence and Security Council and deliberates on questions of law with the aim of reaching convergence between German and French law. It can also hold its own deliberations and pass its own resolutions. These must be debated by both the Bundestag and the Assemblée.

These assemblies are intended to reflect the political makeup of the legislature.

The President of the Bundestag or his/her deputies regularly take part in different formats for (speakers of) parliaments, such as the Conference of the Speakers of European Parliaments or the World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments.

11. Bilateral and multilateral parliamentary cooperation

The Bundestag has a dedicated International Department which deals with the different parliamentary assemblies and international programmes the Bundestag takes part in.

For example, the Bundestag takes part in [INTER PARES](#), a programme under the guidance of the European Parliament, offering capacity building support to parliaments worldwide in order to strengthen democracy.

The Bundestag is also part of the ECPRD (European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation) network which connects the research services and libraries of the Council of Europe parliaments and facilitates the exchange of information.

The Bundestag and the U.S. Congress jointly organise the [Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange](#), a programme offering high school students from Germany and the United States the opportunity to live and visit school in the other country for a year. Each participant is assigned to a member of the respective parliament. The programme is under the joint tutelage of the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives and the President of the Bundestag.

Furthermore, though this is not strictly-speaking an interparliamentary programme, the Bundestag offers the [International Parliamentary Scholarship \(IPS\)](#), a long-running programme that offers scholarships and work at the Bundestag to young people from numerous partner countries annually. In 2026, there will be about 85 participants from more than 35 countries.

There are also frequent study visits and exchanges between members of the administration of different parliaments. Staff has taken part in exchange visits with the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Camera dei Deputati, the Knesset, the Polish Sejm, the U.S. Congress and the Assemblée nationale.

Of particular note is the staff exchange between the Bundestag and the Assemblée nationale. A member of the administrative staff of the Assemblée will work for a year at the Bundestag in Berlin, and a counterpart from the Bundestag at the Assemblée nationale in Paris.

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