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Germany and ReArm Europe 2030: Strategic Leadership, Domestic Constraints and International Bargaining

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Abstract
The Russia–Ukraine war has fundamentally altered Europe's security environment and intensified efforts to strengthen the European Union's defence capabilities. Against this background, the EU's ReArm Europe 2030 initiative has placed renewed emphasis on defence investment, industrial cooperation and military readiness. Germany occupies a central position in these efforts because of its economic strength, defence industrial capacity and institutional influence within the EU and NATO. However, its ability to assume a leading role is shaped by domestic political constraints and the expectations of its European and transatlantic partners. This paper examines how Germany's domestic political dynamics and international bargaining have influenced its role in advancing ReArm Europe 2030. Using a qualitative case study approach and documentary analysis, the study applies Robert Putnam's Two-Level Games Theory to explore the interaction between domestic political feasibility and international defence commitments. The analysis focuses on Germany's financial and defence modernisation commitments, industrial cooperation, institutional coordination and efforts to reconcile national priorities with collective European security objectives. The paper argues that Germany's role is best understood as one of constrained leadership. Although its economic and institutional position gives it considerable influence, domestic political considerations, fiscal pressures and differing expectations among European partners limit its capacity to pursue an unrestricted or unilateral leadership strategy. Germany therefore advances European defence primarily through negotiation, consensus-building and institutional coordination. The study concludes that the effectiveness of ReArm Europe 2030 will depend not only on financial mobilisation and industrial expansion but also on the ability of Germany and its European partners to reconcile domestic political constraints with shared defence requirements.

Keywords: *Germany; ReArm Europe 2030; Two-Level Games Theory; domestic political constraints; European defence integration*

1. Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 exposed weaknesses in European military readiness and defence-industrial capacity, challenging assumptions about the continent's post-Cold War security order. The war renewed the importance of credible deterrence, sustained defence investment and the ability to produce and coordinate military capabilities (Mölling et al., 2024; Siddi, 2022). The European Union's ReArm Europe 2030 initiative, subsequently associated with the Readiness 2030 framework, seeks to strengthen European defence through financial mobilisation, industrial cooperation and coordination among member states (European Commission, 2025; Clapp et al., 2025). Its success depends not only on increased expenditure but also on whether national resources and priorities can be aligned with collective security

requirements. Germany occupies a central position in this process. Its economic strength, industrial capacity and influence within the European Union and NATO make its participation consequential for European rearmament (Dowd et al., 2024; Hellmann, 2016). The Zeitenwende, increased defence spending and renewed attention to Bundeswehr modernisation reflected a reassessment of Germany's security priorities (Mello, 2024; Stengel, 2025). However, material resources alone do not guarantee political leadership or effective implementation.

Germany's position creates a tension between its capacity to influence European defence and the domestic conditions governing its contribution. Parliamentary processes, fiscal priorities, public attitudes and established preferences for multilateral cooperation shape the commitments its government can sustain. At the international level, Germany must also reconcile national interests with the expectations of European partners and NATO allies. The research problem is therefore not simply whether Germany supports European rearmament but how domestic political constraints and international bargaining shape the form and extent of its contribution. Neither its economic weight nor the existence of domestic constraints alone adequately explains its role. The relationship between national political feasibility and collective defence commitments requires closer examination.

This paper seeks to inquire:

How have Germany's domestic political constraints and international bargaining dynamics shaped its role in advancing the EU's ReArm Europe 2030 initiative?

It argues that Germany exercises constrained leadership. Its economic and institutional position gives it considerable influence but its contribution is shaped by domestic political feasibility and the need to negotiate with European partners. Germany consequently advances collective defence through financial and industrial engagement, political coordination and institutional cooperation rather than unrestricted unilateral direction. The analysis applies Robert Putnam's Two-Level Games Theory, which explains how governments negotiate internationally while seeking sufficient domestic support to sustain their commitments (Putnam, 1988). The framework connects external expectations for greater German responsibility with the domestic conditions that shape policy choices and implementation. Using a qualitative case study and documentary analysis, the paper examines Germany's engagement with ReArm Europe 2030, the domestic constraints affecting its commitments and the international bargaining surrounding European defence cooperation. It does not systematically compare other European states or use quantitative modelling. The study contributes to understanding how a state's material capacity translates into political influence when its choices are constrained by domestic institutions and collective negotiations. It treats German leadership as a negotiated process shaped by strategic requirements, national political feasibility and institutional cooperation.

2. European Defence, Germany's Strategic Role and the Research Gap

The post-Cold War European security order placed considerable emphasis on economic interdependence, diplomacy and institutional cooperation. Although this approach supported economic development but reduced attention to defence investment contributed to weaknesses in military readiness and capability development (Dorn, 2024). The deterioration of EU–Russia relations challenged the assumption that economic engagement could sufficiently manage strategic differences. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reinforced the importance of deterrence, military preparedness and defence-industrial capacity (Siddi, 2022; Mölling et al., 2024). These developments strengthened the case for collective European action but did not produce uniform national responses. Member states continue to differ in their threat perceptions, political priorities and approaches to defence cooperation. Germany is particularly significant because its economic weight and institutional influence give it considerable potential

to shape the European response, while its established preference for restraint and multilateralism influences how it exercises that influence (Hellmann, 2016; Hyde-Price, 2022). The literature on European defence integration highlights the tension between developing greater European capacity and preserving national decision-making authority and transatlantic security arrangements. Strategic autonomy concerns Europe's ability to assume greater responsibility for its security, rather than necessarily replacing NATO or existing alliances (Damen, 2022). The challenge is to translate political agreement into practical cooperation, including coordinated procurement, industrial development and the delivery of usable military capabilities.

ReArm Europe 2030 reflects this effort to connect national defence investment with wider European objectives (European Commission, 2025; Clapp et al., 2025). Nevertheless, additional spending does not automatically produce integrated capabilities. National procurement priorities, industrial interests and differing views on the relationship between EU initiatives and NATO can complicate implementation. Scazzieri (2025) contributes to the debate on European defence cooperation, highlighting the broader policy questions surrounding the development of European capabilities. This literature establishes that the effectiveness of ReArm Europe depends not only on financial mobilisation but also on the political coordination required to turn resources into collective defence capacity. Research on German foreign and security policy draws attention to the relationship between the country's economic influence, historical experience and preference for multilateral cooperation. Germany has often exercised influence through diplomacy and institutions rather than unilateral military leadership (Hellmann, 2016; Hyde-Price, 2022). The Zeitenwende and subsequent defence commitments indicate a reassessment of this approach but the extent of change remains contested.

Mello (2024) examines Germany's post-2022 security transformation, while Stengel (2025) draws attention to the coexistence of strategic change and historical continuity. Taken together, this literature cautions against treating the Zeitenwende as an automatic or complete break with previous policy. Germany's willingness to assume greater responsibility must also be distinguished from its ability to implement commitments consistently. Its role in European rearmament therefore requires attention to both its strategic ambitions and the political conditions shaping their delivery. The literature on ReArm Europe 2030 connects the changing security environment with the need for greater defence expenditure, industrial capacity and coordination among member states. European Commission (2025) sets out the policy framework, while Clapp et al. (2025) and Mölling et al. (2024) address the strategic and capability requirements underlying renewed European defence efforts. Scazzieri (2025) further informs discussion of the political and institutional challenges involved in strengthening European defence.

An important implication is that collective rearmament requires more than agreement on the scale of investment. It also depends on how governments negotiate priorities, distribute responsibilities and reconcile national constraints with shared objectives. Germany's contribution is consequential precisely because its choices can affect both the resources available for European defence and the political feasibility of collective initiatives. Existing scholarship explains the deterioration of the European security environment, the ambitions and limitations of defence integration and Germany's evolving security policy. However, these strands do not fully explain how Germany's domestic political constraints interact with international bargaining to shape its contribution to ReArm Europe 2030.

This paper addresses that gap by examining Germany's role as one of constrained leadership. Drawing on Putnam (1988), it connects domestic political feasibility with international

commitments, providing a framework for analysing why Germany's material and institutional influence does not necessarily translate into unrestricted leadership. The focus is consequently not simply on whether Germany supports European rearmament but on how its contribution is negotiated, limited and implemented.

3. Theoretical Framework: Two-Level Games Theory

This paper adopts Robert Putnam's Two-Level Games Theory to explain how Germany's role in ReArm Europe 2030 is shaped by the interaction between international bargaining and domestic political constraints. Putnam (1988) argues that foreign policy cannot be understood solely through external pressures or by treating states as unified actors. Governments must negotiate with international partners while securing sufficient domestic support to sustain the commitments they make. The framework identifies two interconnected levels. At Level I, political leaders negotiate with other governments and international institutions over agreements and policy commitments. At Level II, those commitments must secure domestic acceptance through relevant political institutions and actors. These may include parliamentary parties, coalition partners, public opinion and institutions responsible for implementing policy. An agreement that appears strategically desirable internationally may nevertheless prove difficult to sustain if it lacks sufficient domestic support (Putnam, 1988).

A central concept is the domestic win-set, meaning the range of international agreements that can obtain the necessary domestic approval. A broad win-set gives leaders greater flexibility to negotiate commitments, whereas a narrow win-set restricts the options they can credibly accept. The size of the win-set is influenced by political preferences, institutional arrangements and the balance of domestic interests. International pressures may also alter domestic calculations, creating support for policies that previously faced resistance (Putnam, 1988). The theory is particularly relevant to Germany's engagement with European defence because its government must reconcile demands for stronger collective security with domestic political and fiscal considerations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine increased pressure for military preparedness and greater European defence capacity. However, the extent to which Germany can respond depends not only on its strategic assessment but also on the domestic support available for defence expenditure, military modernisation and longer-term commitments.

At the international level, Germany must negotiate with EU partners and account for NATO commitments while contributing to common defence objectives. At the domestic level, its policy choices are shaped by coalition politics, parliamentary processes, fiscal priorities and public attitudes. These factors can influence the scale, timing and form of its commitments. Domestic constraints may limit the government's negotiating flexibility, while international expectations may encourage policy adjustments that would otherwise be politically difficult. This interaction is central to understanding Germany's role in ReArm Europe 2030. Its economic and institutional position gives it substantial potential to influence European rearmament but influence does not automatically translate into unrestricted leadership. Germany must negotiate outcomes that are acceptable to its European partners and politically sustainable at home.

The paper uses Two-Level Games Theory to examine Germany's leadership through three connected considerations: its international commitments to European defence cooperation, the domestic conditions that shape those commitments and the extent to which negotiated policies can be implemented. The framework does not assume that domestic constraints always prevent action or that international pressure necessarily produces greater defence investment. Instead, it directs attention to how these pressures interact in particular policy decisions. The central proposition is that Germany exercises constrained leadership because its contribution to ReArm Europe 2030 depends on reconciling collective defence ambitions with domestic political

feasibility. Its preferred reliance on negotiation, coordination and institutional cooperation can facilitate agreement but it may also limit the speed or scope of action when national and European priorities diverge. The framework therefore provides the basis for analysing Germany's defence transformation and assessing how domestic constraints and international bargaining shape its contribution to European rearmament (Putnam, 1988).

4. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative case-study design to examine how Germany's domestic political constraints and international bargaining dynamics shape its role in ReArm Europe 2030. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study investigates political processes, institutional behaviour and policy implementation rather than statistically measuring relationships. The case-study method allows Germany's defence policy to be examined within its political and strategic context (Yin, 2018). Germany is selected because of its economic weight, influence within the European Union and significance to European defence cooperation. Its established emphasis on restraint and multilateralism also provides a relevant context for examining the political challenges associated with assuming greater military responsibility (Hellmann, 2016; Hyde-Price, 2022). The analysis focuses on developments following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, particularly Germany's defence transformation and engagement with ReArm Europe 2030.

The research relies on qualitative documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources. These include official policy documents, parliamentary debates, coalition agreements, defence policy statements, European Union publications, academic literature and relevant policy research. Such material provides evidence of government commitments, domestic political positions and the institutional context in which defence decisions are made. The analysis organises this evidence around three connected dimensions: Germany's international commitments and engagement with European defence cooperation; domestic political, fiscal and institutional constraints; and the implementation of defence commitments. These dimensions are interpreted through Putnam's (1988) Two-Level Games Theory to assess how international expectations interact with domestic political feasibility.

The study is limited to Germany and does not systematically compare its performance with that of other European states. Its conclusions are therefore case-specific. Documentary analysis can establish policy positions and identify patterns in decision-making but it cannot independently determine the influence of every political factor. The findings are consequently based on interpreting the available evidence in relation to the research question and theoretical framework.

5. Germany's Defence Transformation and Domestic Constraints

5.1 Zeitenwende and Germany's Strategic Reassessment

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted a reassessment of Germany's defence priorities. The Zeitenwende created greater political scope for strengthening the Bundeswehr, increasing defence expenditure and addressing deficiencies in military preparedness. It also reinforced the recognition that European security required sustained investment and stronger defence capabilities (Mölling et al., 2024; Siddi, 2022). However, the announcement of a strategic turning point should be distinguished from the implementation of defence reform. Germany's established political institutions, fiscal priorities and strategic traditions continued to influence how far and how quickly policy could change. Mello (2024) and Stengel (2025) highlight the importance of considering both change and continuity in Germany's post-2022 security policy. This distinction matters for ReArm Europe 2030. Germany's economic and institutional position gives it considerable potential to support European rearmament but

its contribution depends on the ability to sustain domestic agreement and translate political commitments into military capabilities. The Zeitenwende therefore provides the strategic context for examining the constraints that shape Germany's role.

5.2 Parliamentary Oversight and Institutional Constraints

Parliamentary processes shape Germany's defence policy by subjecting decisions to political scrutiny and institutional approval. This oversight supports democratic accountability but it also means that defence commitments must be developed and maintained within established procedures. Decisions concerning military expenditure, capability development and security commitments cannot be separated from the institutions responsible for authorising and scrutinising them. The changed security environment strengthened the case for defence reform but it did not remove these institutional requirements. Governments must explain policy choices, secure sufficient political support and work within the relevant budgetary and administrative arrangements. Consequently, strategic urgency does not necessarily produce immediate implementation. For Germany, the significance of parliamentary oversight is not that it prevents defence transformation but that it shapes the process through which transformation takes place. In Two-Level Games Theory, domestic institutions help determine which international commitments can obtain sufficient support at home (Putnam, 1988). This affects the government's flexibility when responding to European expectations for greater German defence contributions.

5.3 Coalition Politics and Negotiated Defence Reform

Coalition politics provides a further explanation for the negotiated character of Germany's defence transformation. Governing parties may share the view that military preparedness needs to improve while differing over expenditure, arms transfers, the pace of modernisation and the balance between defence and other public priorities. These differences make compromise an important part of policy development. The invasion of Ukraine strengthened the political justification for reform but agreement on the general need for stronger defence did not guarantee consensus over every measure. Coalition partners still had to reconcile their priorities and maintain sufficient political cohesion to support government decisions. Mello (2024) highlights the importance of domestic political dynamics in understanding Germany's changing security policy.

Compromise can sustain agreement where more extensive proposals might encounter resistance but it can also produce incremental policy change. This should not be interpreted simply as an absence of strategic direction. Rather, it illustrates how the form and pace of reform are influenced by the need to maintain domestic support. The same dynamic affects Germany's international role. Commitments made through European defence cooperation must remain politically sustainable within Germany. As Putnam (1988) suggests, the scope of internationally negotiable outcomes is linked to the range of policies that can secure domestic acceptance. Coalition politics therefore influences not only the implementation of German defence policy but also the commitments its government can credibly sustain.

5.4 Fiscal Constraints and Defence Investment

Defence transformation requires sustained resources, not merely a short-term political commitment. Germany's efforts to strengthen military capabilities must be reconciled with fiscal rules, budgetary discipline and competing public expenditure priorities. Defence spending exists alongside demands relating to social welfare, economic stability and public investment, making resource allocation a continuing political question. Dorn (2024) emphasises the importance of sustained defence investment for restoring credible European deterrence. The challenge extends beyond allocating additional funds: military readiness and capability development require

continuity of expenditure over time. For Germany, the issue is therefore whether defence commitments can be financed and maintained within the broader framework of public finances. Fiscal constraints do not necessarily prevent increased defence expenditure but they influence the choices available to policymakers. Disagreement may concern the scale of additional spending, its funding arrangements or the relative priority assigned to defence compared with other needs. These decisions affect the pace and sustainability of military modernisation. The implications extend to ReArm Europe 2030. European initiatives can provide frameworks for coordinating investment and supporting collective capabilities but they do not remove national budgetary choices. Germany's participation must therefore reconcile European defence objectives with domestic decisions about expenditure and fiscal sustainability. Its influence depends partly on whether it can translate economic capacity into commitments that remain politically and financially credible.

5.5 Public Opinion and Germany's Strategic Culture

Germany's defence transformation also takes place within a political culture shaped by historical experience, military restraint and a preference for multilateral cooperation. These traditions influence how greater military responsibility is understood and justified. Although the changed security environment strengthened the case for defence reform, it did not automatically remove established concerns about the use of military power. Public attitudes matter because defence commitments require political legitimacy, particularly when they involve sustained expenditure or expanded security responsibilities. Support for strengthening the Bundeswehr may coexist with reservations about particular military measures, the costs of rearmament or the appropriate scope of Germany's international role. Public opinion should therefore be understood as a potential influence on the conditions for reform, rather than as a uniform or unchanging constraint.

Stengel (2025) cautions against treating the Zeitenwende as a complete break with Germany's previous security orientation. The coexistence of strategic reassessment and established political traditions helps explain why changes in policy direction may proceed alongside continuity in the way military responsibility is approached. For ReArm Europe 2030, these factors affect the domestic context in which Germany participates in collective defence. Its contribution must be justified not only in terms of external security requirements but also in ways that remain acceptable within its political environment. Strategic culture and public attitudes consequently shape the legitimacy and durability of defence commitments.

5.6 Administrative Capacity and Implementation Challenges

Even when political agreement and financial resources are available, defence transformation depends on the institutions responsible for implementing decisions. Procurement processes, administrative coordination and the conversion of funding into operational capabilities can affect the relationship between announced commitments and practical outcomes. Higher expenditure alone does not establish that capability gaps have been resolved. This distinction is important when assessing the Zeitenwende. Policy declarations establish strategic intent, while budgetary allocations indicate the resources made available. Neither, on its own, demonstrates that the required military capabilities have been delivered. Mader and Schoen (2023), Röhl et al. (2023) and Wolff et al. (2024) inform the wider discussion of the structural and implementation challenges associated with defence transformation and European rearmament.

Administrative capacity also affects Germany's contribution to collective European objectives. Defence cooperation requires national decisions to be translated into capabilities that can support wider commitments. Delays or difficulties in implementation can limit the practical value of political and financial contributions, even where the strategic rationale for reform is widely

recognised. Germany's role must therefore be assessed across three stages: political commitment, resource allocation and implementation. Progress at one stage does not necessarily establish success at the others. The effectiveness of its contribution to ReArm Europe 2030 depends on the ability to connect these stages through sustained institutional action.

5.7 Cumulative Effects of Domestic Constraints

The factors examined above interact rather than operate independently. Parliamentary procedures shape how decisions are approved; coalition politics influences the scope of agreement; fiscal priorities determine the resources that can be sustained; public attitudes affect political legitimacy; and administrative capacity influences the delivery of capabilities. Together, these factors help explain why strategic reassessment does not automatically result in rapid or comprehensive transformation. The interaction between constraints is particularly important. Greater political support for defence spending may widen the range of acceptable policy choices without resolving budgetary trade-offs or implementation difficulties. Similarly, additional funding cannot guarantee effective capability development if administrative processes remain a bottleneck. Progress in one area may therefore coexist with continuing limitations elsewhere.

This pattern is consistent with Putnam's (1988) Two-Level Games Theory. The changed security environment widened the domestic political space for defence reform, but the range of commitments that could be sustained remained shaped by political agreement, fiscal feasibility and institutional capacity. External pressure strengthened the rationale for action without removing the need for domestic acceptance. Germany's post-2022 trajectory is consequently best understood as constrained adaptation. The country reassessed its security priorities and increased the political importance of military preparedness, yet the implementation of reform continued to depend on domestic conditions. In the context of ReArm Europe 2030, this supports the broader argument that Germany's leadership is significant but negotiated. Its economic and institutional influence can advance European defence cooperation, while the form and extent of its contribution remain dependent on the reconciliation of national political feasibility with collective security ambitions.

6. Germany's Constrained Leadership and the Implementation of ReArm Europe 2030

The analysis indicates that Germany's role in ReArm Europe 2030 cannot be explained by its economic resources or the urgency of the external security threat alone. Its industrial capacity and institutional influence give it considerable potential to advance European defence cooperation but the extent of its contribution depends on domestic political agreement and the ability to implement policy commitments. This distinction is consistent with scholarship highlighting the influence of Germany's strategic traditions and the structural challenges facing defence investment (Hellmann, 2016; Hyde-Price, 2022; Dorn, 2024). The Zeitenwende represented a significant reassessment of Germany's security responsibilities but it did not eliminate established political and institutional practices. Germany's continued emphasis on multilateralism and negotiated action suggests that strategic change can coexist with institutional continuity (Mello, 2024; Stengel, 2025). Its leadership is therefore consequential without being unrestricted.

Putnam's (1988) Two-Level Games Theory helps explain this relationship. Internationally, Germany faces expectations to contribute to stronger European defence capabilities, support industrial coordination and sustain credible commitments. Domestically, policymakers must ensure that these commitments remain politically acceptable, financially feasible and institutionally deliverable. The changed security environment widened the range of defence policies that could gain domestic support. However, this did not remove differences over expenditure, competing priorities or the implementation of reform. Germany's international

bargaining position consequently depends partly on what its government can sustain at home. This interaction helps explain why greater strategic ambition has produced negotiated adjustment rather than unrestricted transformation.

Germany's experience highlights the difference between agreeing on collective defence objectives and delivering the capabilities required to achieve them. Financial commitments and political declarations matter but their effectiveness depends on sustained investment, industrial output and implementation capacity (IISS, 2024; Wolff et al., 2024). European frameworks can facilitate coordination and help reconcile national priorities with shared objectives, although they cannot eliminate domestic constraints or guarantee delivery (Clapp et al., 2025; Scazzieri, 2025). Germany should therefore be understood neither as a passive participant nor as a state able to determine European rearmament independently. Its contribution is better characterised as constrained leadership, exercised through negotiated commitments, institutional cooperation and the reconciliation of domestic and international priorities. The broader success of ReArm Europe 2030 will depend not only on Germany's choices but also on the cooperation of other member states and their capacity to translate agreed objectives into practical capabilities.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined how Germany's domestic political constraints and international bargaining dynamics have shaped its role in advancing the European Union's ReArm Europe 2030 initiative. The analysis demonstrates that Germany's economic resources and institutional influence make it an important contributor to European rearmament but these advantages do not automatically translate into unrestricted leadership. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted a significant reassessment of German defence policy through the *Zeitenwende*. Nevertheless, the implementation of this change has remained shaped by parliamentary processes, coalition politics, fiscal priorities, public attitudes, strategic culture and administrative capacity. These factors operate cumulatively, influencing the extent to which political commitments can be converted into sustained investment and practical military capabilities.

Putnam's (1988) Two-Level Games Theory helps explain this relationship between external expectations and domestic political feasibility. The changed security environment strengthened the case for greater German responsibility, widening the range of defence policies that could secure domestic support. However, it did not remove the political and institutional conditions governing implementation. Germany's contribution to European defence therefore reflects a process of negotiated adjustment rather than a complete departure from established patterns of security policy. The paper's central conclusion is that Germany exercises constrained contribution and leadership in ReArm Europe 2030. Its influence is expressed through institutional cooperation, negotiated commitments and the reconciliation of national priorities with collective defence requirements. This approach enables Germany to contribute to European rearmament while operating within domestic political limits. However, the effectiveness of its contribution ultimately depends on whether commitments can be sustained and translated into capabilities.

For European defence cooperation, Germany's experience demonstrates that strategic ambition, financial resources and political agreement must be accompanied by effective implementation. The wider success of ReArm Europe 2030 will depend on the ability of Germany and its European partners to align national priorities with collective security objectives. Understanding this relationship is essential to assessing both the potential and the limits of Germany's leadership in Europe's evolving security order.

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