Germany’s behaviour in the run-up of NATO’s 2011 *Operation Unified Protector* (OUP) in Libya came as a surprise to many allies since Germany did not participate in a military operation which fulfilled the criteria of a right cause (a ‘responsibility to protect’) and proper authority (a UN Security Council mandate), and which was supported by its most important European allies, France and Germany. Consequently, Germany was accused by the international media of moving away from ‘European unity’ while German commentators explained this decision with the country’s pacifist preference, immaturity in foreign and security policy and a preoccupation with domestic politics (Erlanger and Dempsey, 2011). German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle also pointed to his country’s ‘tradition of [military] restraint’ as an explanation for Germany’s abstention (Der Spiegel, 2011).

Some saw Germany, therefore, on another *Sonderweg* of becoming an even more ‘unwilling’ or ‘unreliable’ NATO ally (Joffe, 2011). This view also seemed warranted since the German government had not even consulted with its French counterpart in the run-up of the UN Security Council vote (von Thadden, 2011). Worse, Germany’s behaviour contributed to yet another split of NATO into a ‘coalition of the willing’ and those opting out of an operation to stop another ‘Srebrenica’ on Europe’s doorstep. Had Germany, as one of the major European NATO allies, chosen to participate, it is doubtful that other smaller allies would have found it easy to opt out, too. In the end, only 8 out of 28 NATO members contributed troops to the operation. Arguably, Germany’s ‘no’ in the Libya campaign demonstrated its potential to organize ‘coalitions of the unwilling’ within the alliance.
Is Germany unwilling and unable to play a major military role within a changing NATO? This is a key question for the future of the alliance. Alongside France and the United Kingdom, Germany is one of the top three military powers in Europe. Particularly in the current climate of financial austerity and NATO discussions about ‘smart defence’, greater German military contribution will be critical to common European defence efforts within the alliance. Yet, German defence spending in recent years has all but stagnated. While at the end of the Cold War in 1990 the country spent 2.8 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defence, in 2010 the figure was a mere 1.4 per cent. Indeed, German defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP has been rather stagnating for over two decades (SIPRI, 2012). This fact has been recognized by Germany’s allies. For example, the UK House of Lords EU Committee in May 2012 asked Berlin to pull its weight militarily to enable the Europeans to shoulder more of the burden in NATO as the US ally shifts its strategic priorities towards the Asia-Pacific (Stacey, 2012).

Against this background, this chapter looks at the evolution of German military power with an emphasis on the twin pillars of political will to use force and the actual ability of the German armed forces (the Bundeswehr) to conduct military operations at the high-end of the spectrum, that is, combat operations. Obviously, these two key elements of German military power are influenced by a range of factors. Germany’s political will to use force is not only influenced by its strategic culture and domestic opinion but also Berlin’s interests in a new European geostrategic setting which define its current approach to NATO operations. Germany’s ability to conduct operations depends not only on its willingness to spend enough on defence but also on implementing much-needed defence reform, particularly with regard to the structure of Bundeswehr.

To provide context, the chapter will first introduce a brief historical discussion of Germany’s defence policy. The main focus will then be on Germany’s evolution as a military power in the modern era by analysing both the question of political will and military capability. It finds that Germany has turned into a much more selective ally when it comes to supporting NATO operations. While it is not reluctant per se to use military force, including at the sharp end of the spectrum, it has grown more sceptical about the utility of ‘wars of choice’. As a result, the German armed forces will only develop a relatively limited capability for high-end expeditionary operations.