

Germany's Zeitenwende and the Future of European Security

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When German chancellor Olaf Scholz introduced the term *Zeitenwende* (literally, "historical turning point") in his speech three days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was primarily intended to describe the new security situation in Europe. According to the German chancellor, Russia's blatant and brutal war of aggression was a clear breach of the fundamental norms governing the post-war European security architecture. Denying Russian President Vladimir Putin the ability to turn his imperial dreams into reality required a new focus on economic independence and territorial defence "to secure our freedom, our democracy and our prosperity".¹

¹ Federal Government, *Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German*

Shaking the foundations of Germany's security policy

Scholz's speech – and strategic assessment of Germany's responsibility in Europe's order – was a watershed moment that shook German foreign and security policy to the very foundations. Russia's invasion fundamentally challenged two main assumptions that had guided much of Germany's foreign and security policy thinking for years. First was the deeply held view that security in Europe was only possible *with* Russia. This notion previously shaped Germany's engagement in European conventional and nuclear arms control and its attempt to settle

Bundestag, Berlin, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/-2008378>.

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the first Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 through diplomacy, namely the Minsk agreements. Second, much of German foreign policy had been premised on the hypothesis that what was good for the German economy would also be good for German security. Mutually beneficial economic relations – even if deeply asymmetric – were the preferred vehicle in trying to transform adversarial relations and transcend differences in governance. The Russian invasion put an end to both notions.

Russia's war certainly set in motion a remarkable shift in Germany's security thinking. How far-reaching the overhaul of the actual defence and security policy will be in the end, however, is difficult to foresee at this stage. The *Zeitenwende* was largely driven by the external shock of the war. The answer to this immediate challenge was – and still is – reactive and propelled much more by a perceived external demand than an internal forward-looking strategic reorientation. The German government has therefore struggled to translate the initial momentum behind the transformation of foreign and defence policy into a coherent programme outlining more clearly what the "strength of our own" to "secure our freedom, our democracy and our prosperity" – to put it in Scholz's word – actually involved.

Where the Zeitenwende has worked

Daring more progress, the title of the coalition treaty of the first German "traffic light" coalition (comprising the SPD/Social Democrats, Greens and the FDP/Free Democrats), was full of ambition to move Germany forward

after sixteen years of Angela Merkel's leadership. While the Russian invasion dramatically reshuffled priorities, sweeping policy changes have been more successfully introduced in issue areas that can be situated within the government's pre-invasion ambition of giving Germany an ecological and progressive overhaul.

The revolutionary transformation of Germany's energy policy is the best example of this process. The *Zeitenwende* speech did away with Nord Stream 2, the controversial gas pipeline connecting Russia to Germany, and with German dependence on Russian gas deliveries altogether.² This has happened remarkably quickly. Within a year, Germany has become independent from Russian gas without catastrophic short-term implications to its economy; it has built two new liquified natural gas terminals and has taken a number of far-reaching measures to boost the supply of green energy.³ Limiting the damage of Russia's war on the German economy was the top priority. This included painful decisions, such as postponing the coal phase-out (a tough sell to Green voters) or increasing public debt

² Jana Puglierin, "Germany's 'Zeitenwende' and Its Implications for the European Security Architecture", in *Berlin Perspectives*, No. 1/2023, <https://iep-berlin.de/en/projects/germany-and-europe/berlinperspectives/zeitenwende>.

³ "Schnellerer Ausbau von Windkraft beschlossen", in *ZDF*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/klima-windkraft-klimaneutral-gesetzespaket-bundestag-100.html>; Georgi Kantchev, "The Five-Year Engineering Feet Germany Pulled off in Months", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/natural-gas-terminal-engineering-feat-germany-11670513353>.

(a hard decision to stomach for FDP supporters). Yet these uncomfortable decisions could be framed as steps to accelerate a policy change the coalition had decided to pursue anyway, including Germany's transformation to a green economy.

Security policy: The uphill battle

When it comes to security and defence, the picture is much more mixed. As a consequence of the Zeitenwende assessment, Chancellor Scholz and many members of his cabinet claimed a leadership role for Germany in security and defence. Germany would have to be the "guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be",⁴ leading the largest conventional army in Europe.

This ambition is a sharp deviation from the government's pre-invasion plans. The coalition agreement saw territorial defence and international missions as equally important tasks, put emphasis on a more efficient and effective management of the armed forces instead of an increased budget, and expressed high hopes for renewed arms-control agreements with Russia to ensure European security.⁵ Making huge investments in the German armed

forces, preparing it first and foremost for Europe's territorial defence, organising the long-term deterrence of Russia and securing a decisive US role in Europe's security was not on the progressive agenda. Therefore, the Zeitenwende in defence and security policy has proven to be much more difficult for the traffic light coalition, with the government struggling to keep a common course managing the daily business of the war.

To be sure, Germany has stepped up to the task of guaranteeing Europe's security in ways that were unimaginable before February 2022. To end the *Bundeswehr's* utter lack of material, the government initiated a 100 billion euro special fund for buying heavy equipment. Parliament granted an additional two billion euro of funding to make up for the donations of material to Ukraine's armed forces. The decision to procure F-35 fighter jets from the United States and, with it, the clear commitment to NATO's nuclear sharing is a milestone decision. According to data from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Germany is the largest European donor of humanitarian, financial and military aid to Ukraine.⁶ The political magnitude of Germany delivering weapons to Ukraine – ranging from howitzers to (eventually) Leopard 2 – should not be underestimated. Berlin has been ready to provide re-assurance to NATO's Eastern flank, for example, through the

⁴ Olaf Scholz, "The Global Zeitenwende. How to Avoid a New Cold in a Multipolar Era", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (January/February 2023), p. 22-38, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1129585>.

⁵ Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens and the Free Democrats (FDP), *Dare More Progress. Alliance for Freedom, Justice and Sustainability*, Coalition Agreement 2021-2025, 7 December 2021, https://italia.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/German_Coalition_Treaty_2021-2025.pdf.

⁶ Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), *Ukraine Support Tracker: Europe Surpasses the U.S. in Total Committed Aid*, 7 December 2022, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/media-information/2022/ukraine-support-tracker-europe-surpasses-the-us-in-total-committed-aid>.

provision of Patriot missile batteries to Poland and assigning a brigade of German soldiers to the defence of Lithuania.

At the same time, however, translating these initial steps into a coherent long-term policy faces four major obstacles. First, beyond op-eds and speeches, the coalition has so far not been able to agree on language and strategy documents communicating its worldview – and Germany's leadership in it – to the foreign and domestic audiences. The planned first national security strategy, the China and Africa strategies remain bones of contention. A more coherent foreign and security policy, as promised by the coalition partners, is yet to emerge.

Second, financially, Chancellor Scholz promised to regularly meet NATO's two per cent spending target. While Berlin could be more or less able to meet this goal with the help of the special fund, it has no plan to increase its regular defence budget, which remains capped at about 50 billion euro, roughly 1,2 per cent of the GDP.⁷

Third, in terms of administrative reform, implementing the necessary structural, personal and material changes to the *Bundeswehr* has been painfully slow. Germany's new defence minister, Boris Pistorius, has promised a reform of the defence ministry and a streamlining of its structures in

February 2023.⁸ A reform of the armed forces command structure originally proposed in the previous election period remains necessary but up in the air. A concept to fill the ranks of the *Bundeswehr* with qualified personnel is missing. Changes made to Germany's procurement process and institutions seem insufficient, too. So far, the *Bundeswehr* has only used a tiny fraction of the special fund to procure US F-35s, while all other projects remain in the pipeline. Recent media reports revealed that the armed forces did not even place orders for the equipment given to Ukraine.⁹

Finally, there is no long-term vision of a German defence industrial policy in sight. It is far from clear how the government intends to solve the dilemma of equipping the *Bundeswehr* as fast as possible and implementing the government's goal of strengthening Europe's defence industrial base at the same time. Based on the assumption that the armed forces' stocks have to be filled quickly, much of the special fund will likely benefit US or national firms rather than European solutions.

Looking ahead

Whether Germany gets its response to the *Zeitenwende* right will matter a great deal for the future of the European security architecture. For Germany

⁷ Ana-Roxana Popescu, "Germany Defence Budget Exceeds EUR50 Billion", in *Janes*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/germany-defence-budget-exceeds-eur50-billion>.

⁸ Matthias Gebauer and Konstantin von Hammerstein, "Aufgebläht ist ein hässliches Wort, aber ja 3000 Leute sind sehr viele", in *Der Spiegel*, 17 February 2023.

⁹ Peter Carstens, "Lambrecht hat Nachbestellungen für die Ukraine versäumt", in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 January 2023.

to become a guarantor of European security, it has to demonstrate its ability to keep the German public engaged, the Russians out, Europe united, and the Americans in.

So far, the steps taken in response to Russia's war against Ukraine have enjoyed broad public support in Germany. The conservative opposition supported the special fund and helped enshrine it in the constitution. When the government settled on increased spending or weapons deliveries to Ukraine, the majority of the public backed it. But this level of engagement and support may fade away once the higher costs of an increased defence role become more visible. Already, the public's trust in the military and its ability to organise Germany's defence and spend the additional money properly is at an all-time low.¹⁰ Since the special fund will run out in a few years' time, while the demand for additional spending will not, keeping Germans engaged and ready to support the transformation will be key.

Relatedly, the *Zeitenwende* is premised on the idea of a long-term containment and deterrence of Russia. What form this will take in military terms in the medium-to-long term is hard to predict, at least in detail. Yet, keeping the Russians out will be not only a military matter but also a domestic policy issue. Voices that believe in the possibility

of a reconciliation with Russia are prominent and will likely become more prominent the longer the war drags on, thus making a steadfast level of public support even more difficult.

At the European level, becoming a guarantor of European security in terms of territorial defence will require that Berlin finds a more effective way to address the current lack of trust in both the West and East of Europe. This is a conundrum as Berlin is mistrusted for different reasons in Paris and Central and Eastern Europe. Paris has been criticising the procurement of US equipment, such as the F-35 or the German "European Sky Shield Initiative", as a sell-out of the idea of European defence. These steps were instead largely praised in Central and Eastern Europe, where, however, Berlin's perceived hesitance to give heavy weapons to Ukraine and the uncertainties over the long-term funding of the *Bundeswehr* raise doubts amongst some about Germany's commitment to carry a larger military burden in NATO.¹¹

Finally, in light of these intra-European differences and the obvious lack of military capabilities, keeping the Americans in remains key to European security from Berlin's point of view. Binding its delivery of Leopard 2 tanks to a similar commitment

¹⁰ ARD-DeutschlandTrendFebruar2023, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/ard-deutschlandtrend/2023/februar>; Marc Drewello, "Rückendeckung für Scholz: Mehrheit der Bundesbürger unterstützt Panzerlieferungen an Ukraine", in *Stern*, 25 January 2023, <https://www.stern.de/33135386.html>.

¹¹ See Camille Grand, "The Missing European Dimension in Germany's *Zeitenwende*: A View from Paris", in *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 23 February 2023, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/node/38400>; Kristi Raik, "Germany's *Zeitenwende* Fails to Address New Geopolitical Reality", in *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 4 January 2023, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/node/38188>.

from Washington made abundantly clear that the Scholz government views transatlantic risk-sharing as indispensable. Yet, with US long-term priorities placed firmly in the Indo-Pacific and a less European-oriented administration than the current one being a distinct possibility, Berlin will have to demonstrate that it can keep the Americans in for the medium-to-long term. That will, first and foremost, require a sustained and successful effort to boost Germany's military capabilities.

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