

Berlin Perspectives

Analysing German European Policy

Germany's "Zeitenwende" and its implications for the European security architecture

iep Institut für
Europäische Politik

Jana Puglierin

Russia's war against Ukraine has provoked significant changes in German foreign policy, highlighting the need for Berlin to embrace the role of guarantor for European security. This requires Germany to increase its defence budget and boost the EU's ability to act in security and defence.

President Vladimir Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 left Germany facing the ruins of its Russia policy. Until the very last minute, most policymakers in Berlin believed that he would not follow through on his threats. They thought that Putin was only trying to intimidate the West with a military build-up so as to get concessions on the status of the Russia-controlled parts of Donbas, maybe combined with some agreements on the deployment of Western weapon systems. Chancellor Olaf Scholz, with France's President Macron, therefore tried until the last moment to put a new spin on the Normandy format and to revive the Minsk II agreement to dissuade Russia from invading Ukraine further. Behind this approach was the idea that reconciling interests with the Kremlin would be difficult but ultimately possible. For decades, Germany's mantra was that 'security in Europe is only feasible with Russia'.

Embarking on a new era, albeit reluctantly

Russia's all-out attack on Ukraine therefore came as a deep and transformative shock to the new government that had taken office in Berlin less than three months earlier, and which had absolutely no intention to turn

Germany's foreign policy upside down. International issues, let alone the prospect of war, had played hardly any role in the 2021 election campaign. The realization that Putin had blatantly rejected the very foundations of the European security order – respect for state sovereignty, the prohibition on the use of force, and the inviolability of borders – called into question virtually overnight not only Germany's Russia policy but also its broader approach to security and defence. In his [speech to the Bundestag on 27 February 2022](#), Scholz said the world was no longer the same as before as a result of Russia's actions. He declared a *Zeitenwende*, an epochal change, was underway because Putin was destroying the entire European security order that had existed since the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.

Germany's government was forced to take drastic measures. Having misjudged Putin's goals so comprehensively, a fundamental course correction was needed. In his speech, Scholz made clear that he was determined to put Germany's Russia, energy and defence policies on a new footing. A special €100 billion fund for the Bundeswehr (later enshrined in the country's Basic Law), a renewed commitment to meeting the NATO goal of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence, and the decision to buy US F-35 fighter jets amounted to a small revolution that many observers had thought impossible. The invasion also led Germany to equip Ukraine with weapons, most recently by delivering 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles and another Patriot anti-aircraft missile system. This broke one of the most enduring taboos of security policy in Berlin, namely not to send German weapons to a war zone. Germany has steadily increased its

support to Ukraine, becoming the largest European donor of humanitarian, financial and military aid to the country with a total of €12.6 billion pledged as of December 2022, according to the Institute for the World Economy (IfW) data.

A large part of Scholz' *Zeitenwende* speech addressed the need for a lasting energy transition. Germany's dependency on Russian fossil fuels, which previous governments had deliberately perpetuated, had turned out to be a major security threat. Berlin had to change course after years of assuming that strong economic relations with Russia (and China) could be kept separate from security policy. The idea of 'change through trade' had turned out to be an illusion. As a result, at the end of 2022, the Nord Stream 2 project was buried and all Gazprom's gas deliveries to Germany were halted. Two new liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals have already started operations and there will likely be at least six of them by next winter.

Under the label of the *Zeitenwende*, Germany's government has embarked on the most comprehensive and substantial transformation of foreign policy since 1990. The process is still ongoing and will be the decisive task of the current legislative term. However, this has been imposed on the country by external events; Germany was very satisfied with the old status quo and would not have sought such fundamental changes on its own initiative. Now, one year after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the initial shock has largely subsided, and it remains to be seen whether Germany will fall back into old habits. In security and defence policy, this seems to be particularly challenging.

A guarantor for the European security architecture

In September 2022, Germany's then Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht spoke of Germany's need to be a European leading power, "[including in military terms](#)". Scholz himself wrote in an [essay](#) for Foreign Affairs in December 2022 that the country aspires to become a guarantor of European security. Both goals require a far-reaching political and social rethink: the German political class and the German public must finally say goodbye to the post-Cold War 'peace dividend' and, for the foreseeable future, to the idea that Russia can be integrated into the existing European security order as a responsible stakeholder. Instead, Germany must prepare for a long-term and comprehensive conflict with the Kremlin, even if the immediate hostilities in Ukraine end.

Looking into the future, many in Berlin fear that the strategic interests of the United States will primarily lie in the Indo-Pacific, that the security of Europe could slip further down Washington's list of priorities after the 2024 US presidential election, and that European countries will therefore have to become much more involved in

deterrence and defence to ensure their security. This has implications for Germany's role in the European security architecture. As the richest European country and one that has benefited enormously from the continent's integration, it is expected to contribute more to Europe's security, particularly to NATO. [At the Bundeswehr conference](#) in September 2022, Scholz therefore stated that he sees the core purpose of the Bundeswehr, which since the end of the Cold War had focused on civil-military crisis management and easily deployable expeditionary forces, to be territorial defence. 'Everything else derives from this mission', he said.

Already after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Germany helped to increase NATO's defence capabilities, especially for the benefit of its eastern members. The German-led multinational task force in Lithuania is the most visible example of this. However, the return to territorial defence is a very big challenge in terms of capabilities and personnel for the Bundeswehr. Germany must now seek to play a key role in the defence of Europe: it must provide strategic depth, serve as a logistical hub in Central Europe, and as the main transit country.

Making the *Zeitenwende* sustainable

If Germany really wants to become a guarantor of European security, it must master two decisive challenges.

First, the €100 billion special fund will not be enough to make up for decades of underfunding the Bundeswehr. Without a parallel further increase in the regular defence budget, the comprehensive restoration of Germany's contribution to the military defence of Europe will not succeed. In 2023, however, the regular defence budget will decrease by €287.4 million, and it will remain capped at around €50 billion in the [medium-term financial planning](#) until 2026. Germany missed NATO's 2 per cent target in 2022 and is not expected to meet it in 2023 either. For Germany to become an anchor of stability for European security on which its partners can rely, the Bundeswehr must be given the necessary structural and material capability, and the government must provide the financial resources for this on a permanent basis.

Second, Central and Eastern Europe has lost an enormous amount of trust in Germany in recent months. After initially being very enthusiastic about the *Zeitenwende*, many countries in the region developed the impression, especially in the first half of 2022, that Germany was too hesitant about supplying weapons to Ukraine and was delivering too little, too late. Added to this was frustration with Berlin initially applying the brake during the debates on the exclusion of Russia from the SWIFT international payment system and on ending imports of Russian oil and gas. Decision-makers in Central and Eastern Europe are also very unimpressed by the fact that Germany was able to build two LNG terminals at record speed but is taking a

long time with procurement projects for its armed forces, which creates the impression that Berlin lacks the appropriate sense of urgency.

Germany's government must acknowledge this, make greater efforts to reach out to Central and Eastern Europe and, above all, better explain its policies. It must now show its partners in the region that it has learned from past mistakes and will not fall back into old reflexes. Unilateral actions such as the Nord Stream 2 project must not be repeated. Instead, Germany must embed its future Russia policy in a European context. Due to its economic size, it also has an outstanding role to play in the reconstruction of Ukraine once the war is over in order to ensure the country's political, economic and social stability and support it on its European path.

As part of a Europeanization of the *Zeitenwende*, Germany should also make every effort to increase the EU's ability to act in security and defence. In the Strategic Compass, the member states committed themselves to investing

more and better in this area, to overcoming fragmentation, to working toward the full interoperability of their armed forces, to jointly closing critical capability gaps and to creating a resilient, competitive and innovative technological and industrial base for European defence. Germany could make a significant contribution to all this through its special €100 billion fund. In his Prague speech in June 2022, Scholz emphasized the need for much closer cooperation between Europe's defence industries. However, Germany's priority seems to be to quickly close its own capability gaps with already available equipment, often produced by US companies. Frustration over the very difficult cooperation with France on developing the Future Combat Air System aircraft has significantly diminished Berlin's appetite for joint European armament projects. However, if it fails to act as a driver of European armament cooperation, Europe will not be able to make progress in this area. As is often the case in German European policy, there is still a gap between pro-European rhetoric and implementation.

About the author

Dr Jana Puglierin is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and head of its Berlin office since January 2020.

About Berlin Perspectives

The policy brief series is published by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) and provides precise analyses and policy recommendations for German European policy on current issues and debates.

About IEP

Since 1959, the IEP has been active in the field of European integration as a non-profit organisation. It is one of Germany's leading research institutes on foreign and European policy. IEP works at the intersection of academia, politics, administration, and civic education. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEP.

Publishers

Dr Katrin Böttger and Dr Funda Tekin

Editorial team

Julian Rappold

Layout

Julia Winter

ISSN: 2701-3014

This text is licensed Creative Commons Attribution- Non Commercial- No Derivatives 4.0 International.

iep

Institut für Europäische Politik e. V.
Bundesallee 23
10717 Berlin

info@iep-berlin.de
www.iep-berlin.de

Supported by:



Federal Foreign Office



Co-funded by
the European Union