



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°4 | April 2022

Zeitenwende: The Week That Shook German Politics


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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Germans are not normally thought of as revolutionaries, and the events of 1989 notwithstanding, there are not many examples of revolutionary changes in German post-war history. Yet, when Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz addressed the Bundestag for an extraordinary session on Sunday (!), the 27th of February, he drastically altered the fundamental pillars of German foreign policy. After Willy Brandt introduced the notion of Ostpolitik in the early 1970s, and Gerhard Schröder led German soldiers into a war for the first time after World War II – in Kosovo in 1998 – Scholz's Zeitenwende speech marked another caesura. His announcement that he would set up a special budget for the German Bundeswehr in the region of 100 billion Euros and permanently increase defence spending to above (!) the NATO target of 2% of GDP was a volte-face in defence policy. Then again, it was only the final moment in a series of policy shifts that shook Germany during the preceding days. The government ended the fiercely defended project of Nord Stream 2, agreed to deliver weapons directly to a conflict party (Ukraine), and supported measures that would disconnect Russia from the Western economic world. Many of these decisions come with potentially strong repercussions on German companies and consumers at a time when inflation and gas prices were already skyrocketing. Through these measures, Germany underwent drastic changes in various fields of policy. In terms of energy policies, it cemented the move towards renewable energies, which Finance Minister Christian Linder coined '[freedom energies](#)'. Yet, it might also mean that deadlines for the discontinuation of nuclear energy and coal power could be extended. At the same time, economic considerations were subordinated to security policies when it became clear that the German industry and people would have to pay the price for sanctions on Russia – quite literally. In terms of foreign policy, Scholz broke with a decade-long, self-proclaimed 'pacifistic' tradition, and introduced a new, less Russophile, Ostpolitik. Furthermore, he expressed a strong commitment to the NATO casus foederis – Art. 5 – '[ohne Wenn und Aber](#)', and to European defence. Further down in his speech he also announced decisions on projects that have long haunted German debates as bones of contention. Scholz confirmed that Germany would buy US F-35 bombers, seek the development of a new European fighter jet, commit to drones; and importantly Berlin would endeavour to buy armed Heron drones from Israel – a project his own party the SPD resisted for years. Finally, Scholz announced that Germany would continue its participation in NATO's nuclear sharing policy, and ensure that new jets would be ready to carry US nuclear weapons in an atomic war. Indeed, this Bundestag session truly changed Germany in many ways. In order to appreciate the landslide this announcement marked in terms of foreign and defence policy, this article will provide a short overview on the history of German foreign policy and how these recent changes fit into its broader lines.

Post-war German Foreign Policy

After the Second World War, Germany was defeated, humiliated, shamed, and divided. It no longer had the power or strength to pose a security threat to Europe and as the Cold War arrived, it was left a pawn on the global chessboard. It would have been the likely battleground of any military escalation; and ground zero if the war had gone nuclear. This general environment shaped German foreign policy strongly: its security was guaranteed by – and outsourced to – the US and its NATO allies. America also dictated the rules of the Western economic system, into which West Germany had to integrate itself. And in light of the horrors Nazi Germany had visited upon the world, there was the expectation from the allies in the late 1940s and early 1950s that the



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country would demilitarise and abandon power politics. Ideally, Germany would be a base for Western troops and a big market for Western products, not much more. Under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, West Germany adopted its foreign policy accordingly. 'Westintegration' – the firm anchoring of the country in the Western world became the *raison d'état*, much more so than the rather abstract goal of reunification with East Germany. A further key pillar of Adenauer's strategy was reconciliation with the Western neighbours, especially France. This led to the project of European integration, so as to overcome the divisions of the past and to ensure peace and prosperity through cooperation, not confrontation. Multilateralism was a concept closely connected to these policies and one that would also shape Germany's external policies for decades to come: no longer would Germany pursue its own way, or 'Sonderweg'. Rather, it would firmly coordinate itself with its allies and pursue policies commonly agreed on. 'No more war' was another popular theme in the early years of the Federal Republic and until the Korean War escalated and the Soviet Union armed its eastern part of Germany – the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – there was no plan to establish an army in West Germany again. With the Cold War intensifying, however, Germany's allies demanded a contribution to NATO and the Bundeswehr was set up in 1955. Yet, it would be completely integrated into NATO in case of war and constitutional norms severely restricted the way in which the military could be used.¹ With these restrictions in place, a euphemistically (self-) proclaimed pacifism emerged, which would be a cornerstone of German foreign policy for decades to come. Towards the East, initial West German policy was one of ignorance and minimal engagement. Adenauer did not recognise the GDR and only had limited contacts with the Soviet Union. The first break with this tradition – the first turning point – came when Willy Brandt announced a new policy, Ostpolitik, in 1969. Its goal was to normalise relations with the GDR and Eastern Europe and to thus achieve de-escalation, change and unification through rapprochement. It also marked a point, when West Germany sought to become more independent in external affairs and proactively engage with Moscow. West German foreign policy now had two centres of interest: the West, and the East.² With West Germany firmly rooted in the Western alliance and within the context of global détente, Brandt 'normalised' relations with eastern European countries and thereby enabled a peace settlement for Europe to be found in Helsinki in 1975. This radical turn in foreign policy – from near total ignoring of the East to pro-active engagement – was implemented under an SPD-led government and it would not be the last time SPD chancellors conducted remarkable policy shifts. As the Cold War re-intensified in the late 1970s, Helmut Schmidt – also an SPD leader – saw through another important security policy decision: the NATO Double Track Solution, which led to the installation of new medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe in the 1980s. For the SPD, with a strong pacifist tradition, this was an important and controversial move, and one that ultimately led to the demise of Schmidt's government. The subsequent CDU chancellor, Helmut Kohl, continued the major policy lines introduced by his predecessors and found his own moment to shine during the turbulent upheavals of 1989/1990 when he took the lead in negotiating Germany's reunification. In close coordination with US President George H W Bush – and against heavy resistance from other European states, notably Britain and also initially France – Bush, Kohl and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev agreed on a deal for unification in 1990, which marked the end of German and European division.

With the demise of the Cold War, German foreign policy changed once again. The country wanted to cash in the 'peace dividend', reduced the armed forces, and continued a policy of shying away from international responsibility and focussing on domestic unification and the economic renaissance of eastern Germany. At the same time, close ties were developed with Russia, and would remain such until 2022. Despite pressures from the US and others, Germany did not want to assume more international leadership, especially not with military involvement, and preferred to conduct 'chequebook diplomacy'. Ideally, Germany wanted to be a ['greater Switzerland'](#). The end to this illusion came with another turning point: the Kosovo War in 1998. Gerhard Schröder, another SPD chancellor who had just won the elections against Kohl, decided that Germany would contribute to the NATO campaign against Serbia militarily. It was the first fighting mission of the German army since 1945 and a major policy shift. A few years later, Germany would also contribute significantly to the US-led war against the Taliban after the 9/11 attacks. Within a few years, Germany had come to assume a bigger international profile militarily. At the same time, Schröder drove a more independent course towards the US during the Iraq crisis of 2002/3. For the first time since WWII, and in concert with Russia and France, the German government openly and persistently opposed the US and its plans for a UN Security Council resolution. German intransigence on the issue caused deep rifts between Washington and Berlin, crevices of a depth that would have been impossible during the Cold War. This was another break with traditional foreign policy, although tensions would soon soothe after Angela Merkel took over the chancellery in 2005. Much like Kohl, Merkel continued the broad lines of foreign policy set by her



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predecessor. She relaxed relations with Bush, intensified them under Barack Obama and kept her cool around Donald Trump. She also continued the policy of close economic intertwinement with Russia – most notably by continuing the now infamous Nord Stream 2 project. Despite all crises, such as the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and Putin's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, she kept the dialogue with Russia open and shied away from overly harsh (or economically painful) sanctions on Russia. Despite its aggressions, Russia was still considered a potential global partner, a player committed to the global order, and not a thoroughly revanchist power. At the same time, Merkel was also committed to the project of European integration but was reluctant to exert overt German leadership – for instance during the Euro crisis of 2008 – or did so only after some hesitation – such as in the refugee crisis of 2015 or the Ukraine crisis around 2014. Although she presided over a series of conservative-led governments she did not institute a major reform of the armed forces, kept defence spending low (and well beneath NATO's 2% goal), and maintained principles such as not to export weapons into crises regions. While being popular in Germany and despite the good intentions behind this strategy – of not adding fuel to an ongoing conflict – the events around Ukraine in 2021/2 had clearly shown the limitations of such a policy in the face of an open aggressor. In the 16 years of her stewardship, Merkel thus consolidated previous basic foreign policy lines and only altered some of them within clear limits. One of Germany's most drastic foreign policy shifts – in terms of its depth but also the small-time window in which change happened – occurred just a few months into the chancellorship of Merkel's successor, the SPD's Olaf Scholz and his coalition involving the Greens and liberal FDP.

Zeitenwende and novel Ostpolitik

The week of 21st February 2022 was a watershed, for Ukraine (and Russia), for the world, for Europe, and for Germany. Within just a few days, many previously established and defended policies changed. Against the backdrop of ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, Scholz continued Merkel's policy of engaging in a dialogue with Vladimir Putin, seeking a diplomatic solution, and maintaining close economic ties with Moscow, including the Nord Stream 2 project, despite heavy criticism from Germany's allies and partners. At the same time, Ukrainian requests for military equipment and weapons were denied, as were permissions for Berlin's partners to send German-origin weapons to Ukraine. However, as Putin escalated the crisis by recognising the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk territories, Germany finally gave in and suspended the Nord Stream 2 project. That in itself was a major break with tradition as economic considerations now had to step back to diplomatic (and security-political) messaging. The intention was clearly to underscore that for Berlin a line had been crossed and to show European solidarity, to demonstrate the West's determination to punish Russia for any further escalation. Yet, this did not deter Putin and when he gave orders to invade Ukraine on 24th February, Berlin's Ostpolitik³ lay in shatters; (economic) diplomacy had failed, and the Ukrainians had to pay the price. Within days, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, Economy Minister Robert Habeck, Finance Minister Christian Lindner and Scholz himself radically altered the direction of Berlin's foreign policy. It started with the – much delayed and long overdue – decision to not only authorise allies to export German-origin weapons to Ukraine, but to allow Germany itself to send arms directly to the country. This was a clear break with decades of foreign policy practise, and one that would have been unthinkable for the government-carrying Green party just months before. Yet, this was only the beginning. In a move that resembled Kohl announcing his 10-Point Plan for reunification to a parliament and government taken by surprise in November 1989, Scholz set out the new government direction to an extraordinary session of the Bundestag on 27th February. Much like Kohl, [Scholz seems to have consulted](#) only a small and select number of people in advance and essentially established fait accompli; seizing on the outrage over Russia's aggression to have his coalition parties endorse the new foreign policy. It was a political earthquake. [As he declared](#) to a Bundestag ostensibly demonstrating unity and solidarity:

We are living through a watershed era. And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before... what is needed to secure peace in Europe will be done.... To make it possible, the Bundeswehr needs new, strong capabilities... It is clear that we must invest much more in the security of our country. In order to protect our freedom and our democracy... The goal is a powerful, cutting-edge, progressive Bundeswehr that can be relied upon to protect us... we need aeroplanes that fly, ships that can set out to sea and soldiers who are optimally equipped for their missions... And it is quite certainly something that a country of our size and our significance within Europe should be able to achieve.



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Scholz confirmed the delivery of weapons to Ukraine. He also announced a special fund for the German military worth a whopping 100 billion Euros – twice the current annual defence budget of 50 bn Euros – to be created immediately and written into the constitution so as to secure it for the future and to create budgetary certainty. He further announced that Germany, from this year onwards, would increase the defence budget to above the NATO commitment of 2% of GDP. So far Germany sat at around 1.55 % and for years had resisted pressures from allies and a suite of US presidents to increase it to 2%. Now the budget would rise by about 25% or more than 10 billion Euros. Scholz further declared that Germany would have to actively defend European freedom and would embark on a series of new joint European armament projects, around fighter jets and drones. Moreover, the government would continue its participation in the NATO nuclear deterrence – or nuclear sharing – programme where US nukes would be flown on German (or other allies') jets. Scholz also said that Germany would purchase new American F-35 jets capable of carrying these nuclear weapons in times of war. In terms of wider security policies, the chancellor committed the country to securing its energy supplies by building up strategic gas and coal reserves – much like for oil – diversifying suppliers, enforcing green energy and building terminals for liquefied gas. In essence, he sought an end to Germany's massive and longstanding reliance on Russian fossil fuels, marking a veritable turning point in the relationship between both countries. Finally, Scholz opened the way for the EU itself to become a more active security and defence actor as he removed German policies that had previously prevented such a development. The chancellor outlined the goals of this caesura in German foreign policies: 'strengthening the sovereignty of the European Union sustainably and permanently.' And echoing John F Kennedy, Scholz said that 'for Germany and for all of the EU's other member states, that means not simply asking what they can extract in Brussels for their own country. but asking: "What is the best decision for our Union?"' He confirmed that 'Europe is our framework for action. Only when we understand that will we prevail over the challenges of our time.' But Scholz also described the turning point that his statement would initiate: 'As much diplomacy as possible, without being naive – that is what we will continue to strive for. But not being naive also means not talking simply for the sake of talking.' So as to underscore the radical changes he just introduced, Scholz finished his speech on a defiant note: 'I thank everyone who stands with us at this time for a free and open, fair and peaceful Europe. We will defend it.' This speech, no doubt is one of the most important ones ever delivered in the Bundestag, and it carries with it a huge deal of significance.

The Significance of the *Zeitenwende*

Why does this all matter? For one, of course, it matters to Germany as it will have immediate consequences for its politics and people. Oil and gas prices will go up as tensions grow further and the war continues. And with Russian gas making up more than 55% of Germany's overall gas imports, Putin has a major blackmailing weapon available. So far, the gas keeps on flowing –also because it is about the only source of hard currency income Russia has left – but there is no guarantee that this will continue. As the winter has been relatively mild, Europe is heading into the warmer months, and some gas can be rerouted from elsewhere, some mitigations exist but it will take Germany a while (approximately two years) to wean itself off of Russian gas; and it will be costly. At the time of writing, the overwhelming [majority of Germans](#) expressed willingness to pay higher prices; but whether that attitude continues to hold remains to be seen. If Russian gas supplies would stop immediately, there would be serious implications for German industry and society, [which explains the hesitation of the German government to support gas sanctions](#). But the rationale for this is no longer to keep in dialogue with Russia, but to mitigate the impact of a gas stop on German businesses and people. In any event, German support for tough sanctions (save on gas) underscore the submergence of trade considerations under security and foreign policy principles. It is an important moment, that was not always spelled out so clearly in German history. Some call it the end of German '[cheque book diplomacy](#)', and others [proclaim an end of the policy of 'Wandel durch Handel'](#) ('change through trade'). It is too early to determine the long-term implications of the *Zeitenwende* – it will take years to see them clearly – but in terms of basic assumptions of how foreign policies will be conducted, Scholz's speech most certainly marks a watershed moment. Politically, the impact is just as huge. After the end of WWII, one of the most successful policies pursued by the Allies in Germany was demilitarisation. Throughout the Cold War, many Germans remained sceptical of their own rearmament, rejected nuclear weapons, and supported the peace movements of the 1980s. With reunification and the demise of



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the Soviet Union, this uneasiness with the military translated into consecutive rounds of reducing the Bundeswehr's manpower and keeping the defence budget low. Even the German contributions to the Kosovo and Afghanistan wars changed little about this trend. [While during the Cold War, the defence budget floated around 3% of GDP, in 2014 it was down to less than half that, and circled around 1.1%.](#) Meanwhile, military spending has gone up again, but the percentage of GDP remained at around 1.5%; well below the NATO commitment of 2%. In the late 2000s, compulsory military service was also abolished and the Bundeswehr's manpower reduced further. Time and again, voices called for more defence spending to allow the military to maintain and update its equipment, [declaring the Bundeswehr unfit for collective defence, and high-ranking soldiers often complained about the disastrous state of the German army.](#) These voices fell on deaf ears. Scholz' announcement finally – and radically – addresses this well-known problem. By pushing the budget above 2%, Germany is finally living up to its promises to NATO partners. With the extra budget of 100 billion Euros, the Bundeswehr is in a position where it can finally update equipment and weapons systems, and ready itself again for the purpose of territorial defence, and the assistance of allies in need. The devil will lie in the details, though, and some compromises might have to be struck to secure the support of objectors within the governing parties and the CDU. The latter's support will be needed to enshrine the special budget in the constitution to secure it throughout future governments. But it is also a move through which Scholz secures the buy-in of all major German parties on such a radical change. It is a true turning point for Germany's defence policy not just because of the budget increases, but also because Scholz committed the country to acquiring armed drones – a topic on which no consensus could be found during previous years – as well as new European armament projects. Both of these will have important repercussions beyond Germany but will also affect the country's future military plans, strategies, and capabilities.

Politically, Scholz's announcement marks an even bigger *Zeitenwende* for Germany, but also for Europe. For Germany, it is the beginning of a new Ostpolitik; less favourable of Russia but more focussed on Germany's eastern neighbours and allies. For Europe, its eastern corner – and to some extent the Caucasus too – will become a major focus of foreign policy again. New measures will have to be found that offer support to EU or NATO members, but especially to non-members who [see themselves as the next target on Putin's list.](#) It is no longer unthinkable that Sweden and Finland will join NATO and that some more intensive forms of cooperation will be offered by the EU and NATO to Moldova and others. The question now is whether this will draw attention away from other crises around the world (and the answer will probably be 'yes'). For Germany, Scholz's speech and the days preceding it also show a 'normalisation' of foreign and security policy, making the country more like the other European great powers, for whom foreign policy includes military considerations. In this sense it marks the end of a pacifistic German Sonderweg. This is not to say that Germany will go around eagerly using its military – it will take years for the new budget to translate into better capabilities anyway – and the reluctance so engrained in German foreign policy DNA will continue to work as a brace. Moreover, systemic checks will remain in place too: the Bundeswehr will continue to be a 'parliamentary army' with the Bundestag having to approve its missions in advance. The constitutional prohibition of planning a war of aggression will remain in place as well. Yet having a better military might mean that Germany will be less reluctant to use it in future crises, in Europe and elsewhere. This will be a shift in political thinking and in the array of foreign policy instruments available. Whether it will also result in stronger German global leadership remains to be seen. Pacifist traditions and the shadows of Hitler and WWII still loom large. Yet, a better equipped Bundeswehr and a government willing to use it – in situations of crises – will contribute to a more powerful NATO with a more credible deterrence. Scholz' emphasis on European projects of armament cooperation also points to the realisation that Europe has to do more for its own security. It was a fortunate turn of events – or perhaps a calculated one on the part of Putin – that Russia invaded Ukraine while Joe Biden is US president. It is difficult to imagine how Trump would have reacted to the invasion, but the general transatlantic climate would have been quite a few degrees cooler in any event. Biden will not be in office for ever, and a return of Trump – or a clone of his – is not unthinkable. A stronger European defence axis is hence indispensable. Likewise, fears or concerns about a better armed Germany might emerge amongst the country's neighbours again – but there are no signs of it at the moment. A Guardian columnist noticed quite the opposite in fact: ['For the first time since the Nazi era, Germany has begun to re-arm – and Europe cheered. Extraordinary.'](#) Still, a better integrated European defence policy might counter such fears should they emerge in the future. European integration seems to work best in times of crisis, and this current one could provide a strong – and long overdue – impetus to further cooperation and integration. As the EU also went through its own



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watersheds – buying military equipment to pass on to Ukraine for instance – there is a window of opportunity here that should be seized.

Conclusions

Ultimately, Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech marked a moment where German foreign and defence policies caught up with geopolitical realities. Hopes that Russia could be contained through diplomacy were dashed as even the close economic ties between Moscow and Berlin could not prevent this crisis from escalating. It is still important though that diplomacy was used a primary mode of deterring Russian aggression. Diplomacy remains Germany's focus. And as Scholz confirmed, it will continue to be the main instrument to avert further escalations and to allow for an eventual resolution of the crisis. Yet, to paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt, Germany had to realise that one cannot only speak softly, but one also has to carry a big stick. Ultimately, Germany's post-Cold-War Ostpolitik as well as European security policy did not work: Gorbachev's dreams of a common European house could not be realised, and Russia could not be turned into a partner and status quo power.⁴ Courting Putin did not work as a long-term strategy, and it appears that the only thing to deter further Putin's revanchism will be a show of strength, European unity and solidarity, as well as the transatlantic security commitment. At the same time, some lines of communication with Russia will have to remain open to end the war – frustrating and despicable as this might be. But the alternative, a cornered Russian dictator fearing for his own (political) survival, might lead to unthinkable – possibly nuclear – consequences. Through weaning itself off of Russian gas, and contributing a significant share again to European defence, Germany might play its part in showing Putin that his current path is not one that will lead him to glory; and that serious negotiations have to resume.

For Germany, the new *Zeitenwende* marks a step in the country's process of normalisation, making it more like other European countries. This includes a normalisation, over time, of Germans' stances towards the military and a realisation of its importance. War is still not purged from Europe. As opposed to earlier years though, it does no longer emanate from Germany. Scholz' new policy should not be a cause for concern in other European capitals; and there are no indications that it is. Contrary to Hitler's, Weimar's, or Wilhelm's Germany, the country is now strongly committed to multilateralism, European integration and the transatlantic alliance. Germany is no longer seeking its *Sonderweg* – it has found its place firmly anchored in the West. Consequently, the new policies stemming from Berlin also allow the EU to change its own future. A lot of what has happened over the past weeks – and a lot of the support Brussels granted to Ukraine – would not have been possible before as Germany would have stalled it. Ultimately thus, Germany's *Zeitenwende* could hail a new age of European integration and cooperation, and could well be a watershed not only for German but also for European history.

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¹ For instance, to restrain West Germany's new military power, the constitution forbade preparations for a war of aggression (in Art. 26).

² Relations with the South were mostly a function of the two other.

³ Germany's policy not only towards Russia but also towards eastern allies and Ukraine.

⁴ A lesson current German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who used to serve as foreign minister before, recently made: „Der Bundespräsident: Interview mit dem ZDF-Morgenmagazin“, Bundespräsidialamt, 5. April 2022, <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Interviews/2022/220405-Interview-moma-vor-ort.html>.