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Article

Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

European View
2023, Vol. 22(1) 85–95
© The Author(s) 2023
DOI: 10.1177/17816858231157556
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv
SAGE

The (false) promise of Germany's *Zeitenwende*

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Abstract
Germany's role as a security actor has evolved considerably over the past decades. While in the twentieth century neighbouring countries feared a resurgence of German militarism, in the twenty-first century the country has come under increasing pressure to adopt a more proactive military posture. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine shattered the European security architecture, many hoped for a groundbreaking reorientation at Europe's economic centre. However, it is unlikely that the historic turnaround announced by Chancellor Scholz will become a reality, as the Russian war will not fundamentally change Germany's international status, nor the key domestic factors that have historically determined its approach to security and defence policy. As Germany's historical baggage continues to weigh heavily, it seems that reforms will not go beyond a better equipped Bundeswehr and a more power-political approach to the defence industry, which already poses a costly challenge for current and future decision-makers.

Keywords
EU defence, NATO, Germany, Ukraine war, Common Security and Defence Policy

Introduction

Germany is the archetype of a status quo power in international politics, meaning it 'is content to preserve the essential characteristics of the existing international order and the general distribution of power' (Schweller 1998, 24). The country has been a core architect of the EU and a key determinant of Europe's relations with the world. From 2003–8, Germany held the title of 'export world champion' (highest net trade surplus) and since then has usually ranked second after China. Remarkably, Germany has obtained this elevated rank without translating its soft power into hard power. The country is a military dwarf compared to France and the UK, lacking in military capabilities and the

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political will to put them to use. In recent years, the Bundeswehr has become increasingly dysfunctional, which has manifested itself in a lack of equipment and a loss of capabilities (Karnitschnig 2019).

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has brought massive interstate war back to Europe. Vladimir Putin’s revisionist aspirations aim to bring Ukraine back under Russian control in an effort to restore Russia’s great power status. Russia’s violent aggression has not only shattered long-held certainties, but has also shaken the existing security architecture in Europe to its foundations. In response, only three days after the start of the invasion, on 27 February 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz proclaimed a *Zeitenwende* (historic turning point) during a speech in the Bundestag. The chancellor announced that his government would use a €100-billion ‘special fund’ for military purposes and raise the defence budget to 2% of GDP or higher, thus exceeding NATO requirements. The *Zeitenwende* speech was widely understood as an effort to turn Germany’s cautious defence policy on its head. ‘Within 48 hours, Scholz tore down the cornerstones of German foreign policy since 1990’, potentially making Germany ‘a leading military power in Europe in the medium term’, according to the initial analysis by experts (*Sicherheitspod.de* 2022, 07:50 and 35:55, author's translation).

However, since the Chancellor’s fanfare moment, many have tried to fill in the blanks left by the speech. Eleven months into the Russian war, Germany’s role as a military player in the next decade is becoming increasingly clear. What one will see, however, is not a major change in the overall picture, but merely a few brushstrokes that leave enough room for interpretation in order for the German turnaround to serve its rhetorical purpose. Judging by the historical background, the country’s role as a military actor will hardly change in the way that the term *Zeitenwende* suggests. This is because most of the domestic factors that have historically determined Germany’s defence policy, as well as the country’s international status, remain largely unaffected by the Russian invasion.

Talk is cheap

When analysing military affairs in Germany, it immediately becomes clear that there is a strong discrepancy between talk and action. Ironically, this works in two ways, as both the country’s military ambitions and its pacifist orientation have been overplayed, depending on the audience. Internationally, German governments like to exaggerate the country’s capability to serve as a military partner and their commitment to burden sharing. However, this is not reflected in budgetary decisions, as Germany has repeatedly failed to satisfy NATO ambitions (Driver 2016, 12). This rhetoric is even more extreme in the EU context, where terms such as ‘European army’, ‘strategic autonomy’ and ‘defence union’ are regularly tossed around, even though these are rather unlikely political goals. However, these terms leave enough constructive ambiguity to appeal to many political observers, and domestically there are hardly any costs associated with such reveries, as the German public has a positive attitude towards the EU and NATO. Moreover, such statements usually do not even provoke much domestic debate, unless a military conflict close to home dominates the news. The result, however, is that Germany is at the centre of the EU's 'capability–expectations gap' (the disparity between what the EU is talked up as doing and what it actually can do in foreign policy) and is seen as an unreliable partner in security and defence (Hill 1993, 305).

One issue that does in fact raise the pulse of the otherwise tame German public is the defence industry and arms export controls. Therein, the political rhetoric is even further removed from actual policy, which has given rise to a dialogue of the deaf among peace activists, think tanks, businesses and the government. First, the facts: Germany consistently ranks among the top five exporters of military goods worldwide. The country produces state-of-the-art defence equipment and its weapons can be found in almost every major conflict zone. For example, the German G3 machine gun (predecessor of the G36 and G95) was for a long time the most-produced small arm globally, second only to the Kalashnikov (Knight 2018). Armoured vehicles, such as the Leopard II main battle tank, are among the best of their kind, and in high-tech industries, such as guided missiles, German industry also plays a prominent role.

At the same time, however, the accolade 'made in Germany' is increasingly viewed critically by purchaser states as the country is known to have one of the strictest arms-export control regimes, where weapons often come with strings attached (Descôtes 2019). It is one of only a few countries to apply end-use controls on site, and since 2015 it has adopted a 'new for old rule' for small arms, which means that purchaser states only receive small arms if they commit to destroying old stocks. While the implementation of these policies is often inconsistent, they reflect a more restrictive approach to arms exports than most other arms-producing countries.

It is this latter reality that German politicians like to emphasise when engaging with the public. On the domestic front, governments highlight respect for human rights and compliance with the strictest international regulations, such as the EU Common Position on Arms Export Controls. In contrast, power-political interests and economic concerns receive almost no mention. A transparent public debate on the framing of a security and defence policy that can reconcile values and interests has thus been avoided for decades. In recent years, this has been reinforced by the fact that large German companies, such as Rheinmetall, have internationalised and now generate up to 70% of their revenues abroad, for example, by manufacturing in countries such as South Africa and exporting to pariah states such as Iran, in a set up that is well-shielded from the public eye (Programm.ARD.de 2018).

The result of these two diverging realities is a rather unpredictable security and defence policy that hinders international cooperation, as well as allowing dubious interpretations of the rules that the German government has set for itself (Platte and Leuffen 2016). It is important to note that this ambiguity between normative standards and power-political interests is not new but was developed long before the end of the Cold War. Specifically, there are three important historical turning points, each of which has led German security and defence policy down a new path. Debates on what can be expected of the proclaimed *Zeitenwende* would do well to assess contemporary dynamics against the background of these historical periods and their echoes.

From Teutonic fury to post-heroic society

No analysis of German foreign and security policy gets around the experience of the Second World War, which shaped the country's national identity in ways that cannot be overstated. For those who have not grown up in Germany this is often hard to understand; however, to this day the Nazi past defines the political ambitions of most state institutions. Historian Dietrich Schwanitz aptly characterises this period, stating that 'the human imagination resists imagining what has come to be called the Shoah or Holocaust—the systematic industrial murder of Jews in extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek and Sobibor' (Schwanitz 1999, 203). As the 'Nazi crimes are of such nightmarish dimensions that they defy all reason, thinking about them has taken on religious characteristics' (Schwanitz 1999, 203). This in part explains why the newly founded Bonn Republic reacted with self-estrangement after the war. In consequence, Nazi Germany has become the historical other of modern Germany, whose national identity was forged in dissociation from this former self. Yet three more specific foreign-policy axioms resulted from this time, forming a sort of master variable.

First, the prevention of mass violence in (Western) Europe through non-violent means became the central ethos on which post-war Germany (and the EU) was built. Second, Germany turned into a 'post-heroic society', embracing the least expansive interpretation of liberalism and a notion of leadership that is defined by a focus on collective achievement and shared accountability (Münkler 2015). Third, reconciliation with the Jewish people and, above all, no infliction of violence or suffering on the state of Israel by the German people became paramount.

These three points summarise the normative self-conception of the Bonn Republic in 1949. However, the new country was quickly confronted with the hard realities of the Cold War, which stood orthogonal to its pacifist ideals. Caught right in the middle of the superpower conflict, Western Germany faced a choice between neutrality or siding with the victorious Western powers; due to US invitations it chose the latter path (Lundestad 1998, 25). Importantly though, this period also brought about a new German self-confidence and a heightened desire for Germans to determine their own fate without foreign interference.

Thus, when Germany was granted the right to rearm in light of the Korean War in 1955, the government used this as a window of opportunity to restore its competitiveness and national self-determination. The establishment of the Bundeswehr, therefore, also brought about the reconstruction of the German defence industry. This stood in contrast to its pacifist self-understanding, but was deemed necessary as the war-torn country was desperate to lift people out of poverty and rebuild. During this period, the Adenauer administration further developed the legal basis for its security and defence policy, which reflects the ambiguity that underlies Germany's roles as an actor in defence today. The first important tenet that emerged was that the Bundeswehr had to be tightly embedded in democratic processes in order to act legitimately. In concrete terms this meant that important powers (the authorisation of the budget and the use of force) would fall into civilian hands, that is, the Bundestag, making the Bundeswehr a 'parliamentary army'. Moreover, it is consistent state practice that foreign missions can only take place within 'systems of mutual collective security' such as the UN, NATO or the EU, which further limits military deployment. Public legitimation of the use of force is therefore immensely important in Germany, and in recent years there has even been discussion about whether individual drone strikes (once drones are armed) should require a mandate from the Bundestag.

The second important dimension concerned the defence industry, where it was particularly difficult to reconcile public demands for pacifism with the production of war material. To square the circle, the Adenauer government and, in particular, Defence Minister Franz Josef Strauß installed two arms-export control regulations even though the German constitution (Basic Law, art. 26(2)) had only provided for one law when the Republic was founded. The two legal frameworks introduced a rather arbitrary distinction between different types of weapons, some of which were to be handled restrictively (War Weapons Control Act), while most others were handled rather permissively (Foreign Trade and Payments Act). This differentiation into two regulations which follow opposing logics created just enough constructive ambiguity to meet the political and industrial needs at the time. By a decade later, Germany was once again among the top five producers of military hardware in the world (Helferich and De France 2022). However, the decision to avoid transparency on this issue continues to undermine the domestic debate, which has taken on pathological features over time.

Peace dividend in the shadow of war

The end of the Cold War represents the final turning point that completes the picture of Germany as a security actor today. When the country was finally reunited, this had important domestic effects and, with regard to foreign/security policy, there is one particular aspect that merits attention (even though it often does not receive any). The absorption of the German Democratic Republic created a much more heterogenous German public with regard to the use of force. It further shifted the balance between economic interests and military power projection in favour of the former. Those who lived under the Communist regime show an even greater reluctance to defend liberal ideals by force, as demonstrated in the context of Ukraine, where support for arms deliveries has been lowest in the area of the former German Democratic Republic (Knight 2022).

Equally important were the effects on the international level. Reunification further dispelled the spectre that had haunted Europe since the First World War, namely that of a resurgent German militarism. The myth of the 'Furor Teutonicus', which refers to the ferocity of the Teutons—the Germanic tribes that existed during the Roman

Empire—had been reborn in the twentieth century and cast a long shadow over European integration. However, when an already powerful West Germany reunited with the East and was immediately integrated into the EU and NATO, these fears began to fade, as Maggie Thatcher reluctantly realised. As a side effect, this meant that both the EU and NATO were expanded almost overnight by 18 million people—three times the population of the Baltic states.

When the Soviet Union went out of business and the US became the sole hegemon, European nation states began to integrate their sovereign powers to a historically unprecedented degree, including in terms of defence. Yet, expectations of a peace dividend were quickly overshadowed by the brutal war in Yugoslavia, which undermined the first constitutive element of the German national identity, namely preventing mass violence in the heart of Europe. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer explicitly tied this into the Second World War context with the phrase ‘never again war, never again Auschwitz’. It was hitherto the most powerful call for post-war Germany to exercise military force over another state and led to a further break with the country’s pacifist identity. In 1995 the Luftwaffe was deployed for reconnaissance missions in Bosnia, and in 1999 Tornado planes launched missiles at ground-based targets in Kosovo. Such action had been unheard of prior to this and thus set the precedent for engaging the Bundeswehr abroad. However, the country’s post-heroic ethos sets strong limits on this, which means that Germany’s scope for intervention is limited geographically to the European neighbourhood, multilaterally to an international mandate and morally to the defence of basic human rights as reflected in, for example, the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (Brockmeier 2016). Any deviation from this requires exceptional circumstances and is politically very risky.

These three periods have forged the heart of the German security and defence identity and only through their lens can the *Zeitenwende* be understood. Indeed, later events such as the mixed success in Afghanistan, transatlantic division over Iraq and European friction over Libya all constitute important political experiences. None of these events, however, changed the core ethos of Germany as a nation state as they were either not significant enough to have a lasting impact on the country’s foreign policy axioms, or they merely reinforced existing identity markers. The question, then, is whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine represents an experience powerful enough to break with long-established path dependencies?

Defence reform as anxiety control

A key aspect that has been left out of the current debate is that Scholz’s proclamation of *Zeitenwende* is merely the second iteration of a fundamental military reorientation in recent years. The first was announced after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, in the 2016 White Paper titled *On German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr*. In line with the conclusions of the Welsh NATO summit, the Merkel government announced that its military doctrine would shift from crisis management back to a focus on territorial and alliance defence. Indeed, when Vladimir Putin began to shift the borders in

Europe by military force, this triggered great uncertainty and fear. The fact that President Trump showed sympathy for Putin while calling the EU one of America's biggest 'foes' only exacerbated anxieties and added insult to injury. As Germany was caught between a rock and hard place, performative acts were needed to create a sense of doing something about the situation and to restore a positive sense of self. This discursive reassurance came in the form of a reformed military doctrine complemented by European efforts under the guise of 'strategic autonomy', 'European sovereignty' and so on.

In a similar vein, the *Zeitenwende* speech can be understood as first and foremost an anxiety-control mechanism. Instead of actually countering a physical threat, it primarily serves to restore a sense of 'ontological security', that is, a positive sense of self and one's future (Steele 2008). This is done by moderately changing institutional routines that are then discursively exaggerated; this is what is at the core of the EU's capability–expectations gap. Arguably, such divergence has been made possible because no military conflict since the Cold War has really challenged the territorial integrity of Germany. Therefore, performative acts allow the government to kill two birds with one stone by, on the one hand, appearing to be in control in times of crisis, while, on the other, not really challenging the domestic spectres of pacifism and economic decline. The peak of this kind of Orwellian doublethink came in 2014, when the Merkel government renewed its commitment to Nord Stream 2, thereby making the country it saw as the greatest threat to national security also its single most important energy supplier.

A note on ammunition stocks further illustrates this divergence between discursive and material reality. More than six years after the reorientation towards territorial defence was declared, the Bundeswehr only possesses enough ammunition for two days of fighting. NATO rules require members to stockpile ammunition for at least 30 days of armed conflict. Despite this, several months into the war in Ukraine, no major procurement decision has been made; in fact not a single euro of the special fund was spent in 2022 according to a parliamentary enquiry by the Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union) (Wiegold 2022). The government has stated that it will first examine procurement needs more comprehensively as part of a new National Security Strategy, which is expected to take a year to complete. While this timeframe would seem purposeful in normal times, it is at odds with the sense of urgency conveyed by the war in Ukraine.

In fact, if the financial dimension is anything to go by, the prospects for change are rather slim. Experts currently estimate that just to replenish its ammunition stocks, Germany would have to invest €20 billion of its special fund (Mölling and Schütz 2022). Moreover, given years of underfinancing and the depletion of resources due to arms deliveries to Ukraine, the €100bn fund could be used up in about four years (ibid.). Indeed, this does not make even a 90-degree change of direction look promising.

Beyond the financial issues, there is also the question of strategic culture: one might ask whether Russia's imperial awakening will produce a new German assertiveness in security and defence. In particular, one might wonder whether Germany will act more independently by taking the lead in European or transatlantic affairs, thereby contesting international norms in a way that is not in line with its established role. Here, too, the war in Ukraine shows that the historical baggage continues to weigh heavily. The standard response of the Scholz government to demands for tank deliveries has been the almost religious affirmation that 'Berlin won't go it alone' in the debates on both the Marder and the Leopard tank (*Reuters* 2023). This reflects a deep fear of acting in a way that could accidentally jeopardise the status quo. Rather than acting as a 'leading power' in military affairs, as Defence Minister Lambrecht had declared, Germany has once again been perceived as the laggard (Germany, Federal Ministry of Defence 2022).

With the fruitless mission in Afghanistan, it appears that Germany's ability to act militarily has been more limited than ever since 1990. For this situation to change there would need to be a realisation that the failure to deter Putin—diplomatically or militarily—in Crimea, Libya, Syria and elsewhere is partly responsible for the current situation (Franke 2021). However, this view does not play a major role in the public debate, which makes a new approach to out-of-area missions and, alongside this, a change in strategic culture seem unlikely.

Zeitenwende scenarios

This begs the question of what can actually be expected of the German *Zeitenwende* in the medium term? As the primacy of domestic politics remains untouched, the question should be reformulated: what is the most important change that the German public wants to see? Judging by the current debate, the answer seems to be a less dysfunctional Bundeswehr and an improved capacity to supply military goods at short notice. The fiasco over the supply of equipment to Ukraine may be a watershed moment in the Bundeswehr debate, to the point that abandoning any reform effort could prove explosive for politicians in the future. Successive governments will therefore be under pressure to demonstrate a more functional Bundeswehr in terms of equipment, planning and bureaucracy, which will be a Herculean task.

As a side effect, Germany might change its attitude towards the defence industry and arms exports. Faced with inflation and the rising cost of defence technology, governments may adopt a more permissive attitude towards exports in order to exploit economies of scale—as already indicated by the recent continuation of arms exports to Saudi Arabia (*Deutsche Welle* 2022). This could also enable them to boost relations with France and the UK in times of uncertain transatlantic relations or legitimacy crises in the EU. However, much of this will depend on whether the current government will be able to deliver on its promise to solve these long-standing transparency issues. In the coalition agreement of December 2021, the parties committed to making arms exports more transparent through a new national export law and to work towards a binding EU arms-export regulation. Arguably this is virtually impossible without a genuine national debate on Germany's role in European security affairs. Moreover, the idea of a truly binding export regulation on the EU level seems unrealistic, as the current EU Common Position on

Arms Exports is more often ignored than not, reflecting the widely divergent export practices in Europe (Cops and Duquet 2019, 16).

The most logical result of the lack of political capital to act abroad and the increased availability of defence equipment would then be to engage more in what Merkel called ‘enable & enhance initiatives’ (Puglierin 2016). This refers to capacity building in partner countries around the world through the provision of military hardware and training. Since March 2021, this approach has also been reflected on the EU level by the so-called European Peace Facility. In the case of Ukraine, the EU has already supplied equipment worth €2.5bn, which would have been unheard of only a few years ago. Given the heightened risk of proxy wars with Russia and China, enabling other actors through the EU could be an effective way for Germany to reconcile international and national expectations.

Finally, party politics will continue to play an important role. As such, it is hard to imagine how a coalition led by the Greens (Die Grünen) and the Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratishe Partei Deutschlands) could sustain a military *Zeitenwende* once the Ukraine war slips into the background of the public agenda. The voter bases of both parties expect, first and foremost, fundamental changes in energy and redistributive policies, which will make any investments in defence hard to justify over time.

Conclusion

If one thinks of the German *Zeitenwende* as a long-term strategy that is trying to connect ends and means in meaningful ways to reach a distant strategic goal, one is misguided. In Germany and at the EU level, defence policy is not strategically motivated, but is the result of sudden outbursts of public malaise and a cautious commitment to international norms and community building. This lack of a clear long-term vision is demonstrated by the fact that 25 years after the launch of the Common Security and Defence Policy, Europeans have had to come together to draw up a Strategic Compass to reflect on both the path that they have taken and their future direction.

For the *Zeitenwende*, a similar process can be expected, as think tanks and state institutions are already trying to fill the many blanks left by the Chancellor. Any clear strategy will, however, be hampered by the fact that the relationship between NATO and the EU, as increasingly overlapping security institutions, remains unresolved. Moreover, for a change in direction, German politicians would have to find the courage to confront old demons and start a genuine debate on the values and interests that underwrite Germany’s defence policy in the twenty-first century. As long as these two skeletons remain in the European closet, a fundamental change in German politics, and also in the Common Security and Defence Policy, will likely be blocked. The drafting of the National Security Strategy has led to a somewhat more constructive public discourse on defence policy but has not ended the old sham debates. With the world changing fast and no concrete outcomes in sight, Europeans are left to hope that by the time the document is unveiled, voters in Georgia, Arizona and Michigan will have been forgiving and that Putin's Russia has magically undergone a metamorphosis.

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