



After Merkel: Germany from Peace to War

KRISTINA SPOHR

RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

In the autumn of 2021, after Angela Merkel retired, her successor, Olaf Scholz, assumed power as head of a new coalition consisting of Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats. Scholz had an ambitious agenda to reform Germany. Yet, within months, Russia launched its brutal military invasion of Ukraine. Overnight Scholz had to adapt to a Europe at war, which raised profound questions about Germany's international role. Was its post-1945 'civilian power status' still viable? What about its deep-seated 'culture of restraint'? On 27 February 2022, three days into the war, Scholz addressed the Bundestag, boldly announcing a German *Zeitenwende*, an 'epochal turn' in the Federal Republic's conduct of foreign and security affairs. This essay evaluates Scholz's grand rhetorical vision a year on, questioning how much his claims for a major German foreign-policy revolution have yielded in practice. It will reveal that although Chancellor Scholz hoped to be seen as a decisive leader, his actions have so far been those of a beleaguered temporizer, unable to shake the age-old constraints tied to history, geography, and party politics. Crucially, his innate caution (reflected in long bouts of silences), his stubbornness, his unwillingness to lead from the front, as well as the structural limitations that Germany has long faced, have acted as breaks. Although the biggest tests are still to come, 2022 was a year of forced reinvention for both Scholz and Germany, and neither looked comfortable in assuming their new role.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Kristina Spohr

London School of Economics, UK
k.spohr@lse.ac.uk

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In fall 2021 the Merkel era came to end. Angela Merkel – a quiet, understated, and pragmatic Christian Democrat – was the West’s longest-serving contemporary leader after sixteen years as federal chancellor. Unlike any of her predecessors since the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949, she left office of her own accord. Her successor, Social Democrat Olaf Scholz, seemed like the continuity candidate – at least until Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. Three days after Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, Scholz declared a new era in German foreign policy, the ‘*Zeitenwende*’, or ‘epochal turn’. Now a year on, it is time to ask what this proclaimed foreign policy shift tells us about Germany’s evolution as an international actor in the post Merkel era. Was the speech mere rhetoric, or did it mark a real ‘watershed’ moment?

1. FROM THE MERKEL ERA TO THE *AMPEL*-COALITION: THE ARRIVAL OF OLAF SCHOLZ IN THE CHANCELLERY

Merkel’s tenure was a time of relative stability despite major ruptures on the international plane. First there was the financial crash of 2008 and ensuing Eurozone meltdown, followed by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine in 2014; then came the refugee crisis of 2015 and finally the COVID-19 global pandemic. When she announced her departure, many felt that they were witnessing the ending of a particular type of governance and leadership style. World news since the early 2000s have been dominated by posturing tough guys – from Vladimir Putin to Recep Tayyip Erdogan, from Kim Jong-Un to Viktor Orbán. And with Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, and Boris Johnson the lines between TV celebrity, clown, and politician became increasingly blurred. Dr Merkel stood out – and not just because she is a woman [1]. She embodied power without vanity [2].

She had her shortcomings: the vagueness of her political program (domestic and European); the absence of sparkling oratory; and the technocratic prudence, verging on hesitancy. In terms of policy, critical voices also pointed to the inner contradictions of her decision-making, particularly when under public pressure [3, 4]. Despite what one might call the paradox of ‘Merkelism’ [5], she remained popular, still the country’s best-liked politician in 2021 [6].

Merkel’s popularity was not enough to ensure that the Christian Democrats remained in charge beyond her retirement. Not only had the CDU/CSU been weakened by a rare and rancorous intra-party power struggle over its leader and choice of chancellor-candidate [7]. It also did not help that the party’s traditionalist wing had been intensifying its critical campaign against Merkel’s steady course towards the political centre, believing that the CDU’s conservative, Rhenish-Catholic middle-class values had effectively been eroded by a pinko, Protestant, *Ossi* woman [4]. Yet while in the election run-up the chief beneficiaries of all the political jockeying appeared to be the Greens, it was Social Democrat Olaf Scholz who was sworn in as Germany’s new federal chancellor on 8 December 2021.

His ascent to the highest office came to many as a surprise. The soft-spoken federal finance minister and vice-chancellor of the fourth Merkel coalition government had after all lost the SPD’s leadership contest earlier that spring to two left-leaning comrades. Indeed, ahead of an election for which German Social Democrats harboured no hopes whatsoever, he had apparently been picked as chancellor-candidate because he could be sacrificed, giving a new generation of aspirants a better chance next time round. Still, on 27 September German voters did embrace Olaf Scholz at the polls – though at 26 per cent of the vote, the SPD’s majority hardly reflected the mandate that previous chancellors had enjoyed. As Germany’s number two became number one, he decided for his party to work in a new constellation, together with the Greens and Free Democrats (FDP). Thus, the so-called *Ampel* or ‘traffic light’ coalition was born [8].

Significantly, the elections had been dominated by an agenda based on domestic stability and social renewal. Foreign policy barely featured. By and large, the voters had wanted to preserve their comfortable lifestyles and Germany’s welfare state. The country indulged in the peace dividend that the post-Wall order offered, with Germans looking inward not outward. The coalition deal was thus oriented around the idea that Germany needed to ‘Dare more Progress’ (*Mehr Fortschritt wagen*) [9] on the domestic front. This was an implicit criticism of Merkel’s failure to pursue reform, but also a nod to history, the new maxim rooting itself in Willy Brandt’s 1969 declaration to ‘Dare more Democracy’ [10].

The pressure was intense to make progress at home, with much needed socio-economic reforms as well as a push for digital transformation and for climate action [11]. None of this was going to be easy, given the natural tug-of-war games in coalition politics, especially when involving such ideologically different partners: social democrats, free market liberals, and the environmentalist greens. Indeed, three of the main ministries were headed by the two parties that have least in common. Anna-Lena Baerbock and Robert Habeck (of the Greens) would lead the foreign ministry and the ministry for economic affairs and climate protection respectively, whereas, the FDP got the finance ministry, meaning that Christian Lindner would hold Germany's purse strings. So, from the outset it was obvious to all that it would take time for the new government to find its feet internationally. Moreover, when it came to world politics, the experience of Scholz and that of his freshly baked ministers was limited.

As chancellor, Scholz initially professed foreign political 'continuity' [12]. However, with Merkel's departure, a vacuum opened up internationally. In this sphere, her timing could not have been worse. Throughout 2021, a crisis had been brewing around Ukraine – a battleground since the *de facto* annexation of Crimea in 2014 by Russia and the Kremlin's support for pro-Russia separatists in the Donbass region. Then in late November Russian President Vladimir Putin began to unleash mass troop deployments on its neighbour's eastern border. Perhaps it was no coincidence that on 17 December, with Scholz only nine days in office, the Kremlin presented the US [13] and NATO [14] with an unexpected ultimatum, formally demanding binding security guarantees while looking for the rewriting of many of the principles upholding European security since the end of the Cold War [15].

Moscow was no longer satisfied with a policy of keeping 'peace at any cost' [16]. Putin's historical grievances over allegedly broken non-NATO-enlargement promises made in 1990 and beyond, and tales of Russia's 'encirclement', wilful humiliation, and victimisation were used to fraudulently legitimise Moscow's actions [17]. By the start of 2022, it looked as though Putin wanted to literally reverse what, according to him, Gorbachev and Yeltsin had gambled away. His aim: to 'gather' [18] the 'historical Russian lands' [19] through the territorial restoration of the former Russian empire, pushing NATO back and the US out of Europe entirely, ending a commitment that dates back to 1949. These were no mere rhetorical power games, and by February, Moscow's risky moves had brought Europe to the brink of war [20]. Scholz therefore had little time to settle into his role, finding himself embroiled mere months into his chancellorship in one of the greatest European diplomatic contests since the Cold War and indeed real war in the heart of Europe.

2. FROM PEACE TO WAR: THE FIRST 77 DAYS IN OFFICE

From its inception, questions also abounded over the *Ampel*-Cabinet's unity and foreign political direction. Whereas Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock lobbied for a 'feminist' [21] and 'values-led' foreign policy [22], stressing her party's intention to prioritise issues like human rights, the rule of law, and democratic values over Germany's financial ties with Moscow and Beijing, Scholz was keen to follow the pragmatic and mercantilist foreign policy of his predecessors. Hoping to reboot relations with the Kremlin, he concentrated on lucrative 'private-sector projects' [23] – most crucially, the Russo-German Nord-Stream II Baltic Sea pipeline – which, he insisted, ought not be entangled in debates about geo-politics and geo-ethics. At this time of crisis, given the intra-coalition tensions combined with the perennial quarrels and speculation over who called the shots in German foreign policy – the Chancellery or the MFA [24, 25] – Scholz felt compelled to forcefully state that when it came to the 'Russia problem', the buck stopped with him [26].

By the new year, the novice chancellor was under mounting pressure to take a tougher line with the Kremlin. Critics considered him 'soft' in *Russlandpolitik*, too conciliatory towards his own party's pro-Russia voices, and too slow in addressing Germany's dependence on the 750 mile, \$11 bn Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline [27]. Baerbock in turn enjoyed the limelight of the international stage and continued with her outspokenness. During her Moscow-talks with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in mid-January 2022, she produced a sure-footed performance – clear and robust. But, inevitably, the shadow of World War II loomed large, especially the enduring, almost numbing, sense of guilt that Germans still carry. Laying the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier close to the Kremlin, Baerbock deferentially spoke of her 'shame and awe' [28]. Russia had shown once more that German emotions are easily

manipulated and Berlin's strategic compass disoriented, keeping the country locked into its post-1945 power-political impotence.

All the same, throughout January and February 2022, Berlin toed the NATO line: To boost the Alliance's eastern flank, Germany sent troops and equipment to the Baltic States and Romania. But Scholz was reluctant to do anything else, particularly on the economic front, dithering about whether Nord Stream 2 should be included in sanctions-package and whether Russia's participation in the SWIFT international payments system should be suspended. Even more damagingly, while Russia clearly ratcheted up its threat against Ukraine, Germany flatly refused to ship defensive weapons to Kyiv [29]. That the federal defence ministry proposed what it thought was a bold new initiative, supplying some 5,000 helmets and a field hospital was met by Ukrainian derision. It was a 'joke', all about as useful as sending 'pillows' [30], scoffed Kyiv's Mayor Vitali Klitschko, who was well known in Germany for his time there as heavyweight champion-boxer.

The guilt-ridden contortions were endless. Baerbock and Scholz both held that the Federal Republic, despite ranking fourth in global arms trade [31], could not send lethal weapons into conflict zones for historical reasons [29]. Moreover, beyond the danger of crisis-escalation, a German armaments-U-turn over Ukraine risked undermining Berlin's stance of 'never again war' (*nie wieder Krieg* [32]) – a policy deeply engrained in the convictions of the SPD Left and among the Greens with their roots in the 1970s peace movement. This was notwithstanding the fact that in 1999, Joschka Fischer, the first-ever Green foreign minister (under SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder), justified his country's participation in NATO's 'humanitarian intervention' in Kosovo with his own impassioned reference to history – that Germany, precisely because of its Nazi-era crimes, had to stand up against aggression, and if necessary, by *military* means [33 ch3]. Yet equally, due to the precedent of 1941, Germans were convinced that Russian soldiers must not end up being killed by German weapons again. Berlin therefore was reluctant to even permit Estonia to give Ukraine some old Soviet-made howitzers that had been formerly East German-owned [29]. Here, and elsewhere, German principles and their interpretations of history collided with Alliance politics, raising serious questions over Germany's NATO solidarity and its reliability as an ally [34].

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Scholz and US President Joe Biden took great pains to put on a display of 'unity' at the White House on 7 February. While Biden reminded the world that 'Germany is one of America's closest allies, working in lockstep,' Scholz stressed that Berlin and Washington 'will act together' while taking 'all the necessary steps' [35]. The chancellor insisted that 'we work very hard to get a way out of this situation'. But if Russia chose to intervene, it would have to pay a 'high price'. While his words were emphatic, Scholz clung onto Berlin's line of 'necessary strategic ambiguity' when it came to questions of details of Germany's actions. Germany may be the 'strongest economic supporter of Ukraine' with \$2 bn and it may also be a significant contributor to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence; yet, these steps still fell short of a real strategy to seriously raise the costs for Russia by strengthening Ukraine's deterrence capabilities, as a way to promote leverage and diplomacy [36].

Of course, arms transfers are not the only way to deter a revanchist power. But there was simply no sign in the winter of 2022 that Germany was prepared to take the lead in the EU's economic response or to formulate any other long-term policy focused on deterring Russian territorial ambitions and enabling the western aspirations of the ex-Soviet satellites and republics. Worse, some of Germany's leading generals came out as so-called *Putinverstehers* (Putin empathisers) [37] – suggesting that the Crimean Peninsula, annexed by Russia since 2014, would never be returned to Kiev's control, that Putin deserved more 'respect' [38], and that Ukraine must not become the West's outpost against Russia. This certainly raised eyebrows in Washington and angered many East European allies – as well as causing much debate in Germany.

Still, Berlin's position continued to remain fuzzy – at least in public. Despite all its rhetoric of 'initiative', 'progress', and 'renewal', the *Ampel* under Scholz seemed stuck, especially in its conduct of Eastern European and Russia policies. It even appeared to some to be harking back to an older past.

To be sure, the SPD has many a time reached out to the history books. And few of the party's contemporary politicians talk about Russia without referring to Willy Brandt's *neue Ostpolitik*

of the Cold War – the long-term ‘change through rapprochement’ (*Wandel durch Annäherung*) strategy towards the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact clients, adopted in 1969. Olaf Scholz, too, in his first address to the Bundestag on 15 December 2021 had invoked Brandt’s approach of easing tensions through engagement with Moscow, though he lobbied for a new EU version thereof; ‘In a united Europe, Ostpolitik can only be a European Ostpolitik’, he asserted [39]. While some read darkly into these words a German desire under EU cover to negotiate with the Kremlin over the heads of the Central and Eastern Europeans, others raised doubts over what a Europe-led response would look like [40]. Surely that would involve a military dimension, not just dialogue and trade-sanctions to keep the peace? In this vein, French President Emmanuel Macron kept lobbying for the idea that Europe’s security would be best served by the reinforcement (under French leadership) of its ‘strategic autonomy’ [41] from the US, whereas Scholz (and Merkel before him) emphasised their loyalty to the two pillars – America and NATO – in European security affairs [42].

The reference to *Ostpolitik* was confusing in other ways, too. Scholz certainly hoped to appease his party’s strong left wing, perhaps hoping to remind them of his activist student days, when as a radical leftie SPD Juso and fierce NATO critic, he had in 1983 protested against the deployment of US intermediate nuclear forces in West Germany [43]. This, however, stood in juxtaposition to his defence of the transatlantic alliance more recently, including as vice-chancellor. Indeed, in almost all his statements prior to Russia’s brutal attack on Ukraine, Scholz had made the era of the FRG’s second SPD chancellor, the Atlanticist Helmut Schmidt (1974–1982) a reference point. Scholz, rather than seeing himself as an heir of Brandt, appeared to be moving towards pursuing a more pragmatic *Moskaupolitik* in the tradition of fellow Hamburger, Schmidt, who in an inversion of Brandt’s approach, had stood for deterrence and defence first and détente second [44 p54].

Scholz’s persistent problem of how to deal with the pacifist and pragmatic wings in his Party, however, goes beyond questions of ideational allegiance to either Brandt or Schmidt. It relates to the deeply engrained historical Russophilia [45, 46] and the more contemporary *Putinverstehertum* (largely the result of the Kremlin’s successful long-running, enormous hybrid warfare campaign against Germany) among many Leftists in the SPD, Greens, and *Die Linke*, not just the populist right wingers of the AfD [47, 48]. In its most unhealthy form this pro-Russian tendency is personified in Gerhard Schröder.

Interestingly, as chancellor, Schröder had, between 1998 and 2005, pursued a New Labourite ‘Third Way’ in economics, and also taken the supposedly ‘grown up’ [49] and ‘normal’ [50] Berlin Republic into the Kosovo War in 1999. Then, however, the latent SPD approach of ‘equidistance between Washington and Moscow’ kicked in, as the Schröder government made its decision of refusal to join in America’s war on terror at the start of the millennium [51]. Real unease was caused when, within months of losing the chancellorship to Angela Merkel in 2005, Schröder became head of the shareholders committee on state-controlled Russian Gazprom’s North European Gas Pipeline company, Nord Stream AG. The original Nord Stream scheme had been given the go-ahead by the outgoing chancellor in the interim period before Merkel took office and then continued and expanded into a second pipeline project – Nord Stream 2 – under her tenure. In 2017, Schröder was made chair of the Russian oil group Rosneft, then in February 2022 he accepted Gazprom’s nomination to its supervisory board of directors – positions he has since quit under immense public pressure [52, 53].

Still, what is particularly ugly and distasteful, is just how deeply Chancellor Schröder’s personal networking came to enmesh the SPD (together with former East German Stasi officers!) with Russian state gas companies, and how he, as ex-chancellor, apart from enriching himself with Russian roubles metamorphosed into a lobbyist for the Kremlin and never unfriended Putin [54]. Worse, in late January 2022 he went as far as accusing Kyiv of ‘sabre-rattling’ while insisting that Putin’s Russia had no intention of invading Ukraine [55].

Gas-pipeline deals between companies of the Federal Republic and Russia were, of course, not new [56]. Indeed, they had started with *Osthandel* in the Brandt-Schmidt era of 1969–1982, gaining traction during the global economic crisis in the 1970s coupled to the two OPEC oil price shocks of 1973 and 1979, when Schmidt had warned against over-dependency on any single country or region and stressed the need for diversification of German energy sources – hard coal, lignite, oil, gas, and nuclear. And yet, there was always a second dimension to *Osthandel*

under Bonn's *Ost- and Russlandpolitik*, and this would reach all the way into the present. The idea being that Russian 'change' could be affected 'through trade' (*Wandel durch Handel*), i.e., that that East-West tensions could be eased and Russia's political unpredictability tamed through economic interdependence [44 chs1-2].

This desire for cooperation meant that by 2021 united Germany had become the biggest western actor with significant and variegated trade ties to Russia. According to Russian Federal Customs Service, data for the first 10 months of 2021 placed Germany (with \$46.1 bn) second among Moscow's top five trading partners – after China (\$112.4 bn) and before the Netherlands (\$37 bn), the US (\$28.8 bn) and Turkey (\$25.7 bn) [57]. Meanwhile, for Germany, Russia ranked 15th [58]. Due to geography and history, Germany's relationship with Russia was unique (as much as it was complicated) among its European neighbours. Since the 1990s, successive German chancellors had adopted a conciliatory approach towards the men in the Kremlin, apparently sincerely believing that trade and dialogue would not merely improve Russo-German relations, but foster stability and peace in the post-Cold War world. And so, as the two countries' interdependence had exponentially grown, it had become referred to as a 'special relationship' (*Sonderverhältnis*) [46, 59].

Long-term, these calculations vis-à-vis the Kremlin evidently did not work out [60, 61] – just as Berlin's obsession with *Dialogpolitik* above all else appears to have been erroneous when conducted without a serious defence and deterrence policy and without a 'Plan B' regarding alternative energy supplies. Because Putin in his *Westpolitik* certainly seemed to have kept open the option to weaponize energy policy, and particularly the Russo-German Nord Stream project, as he began to wage Russia's non-linear warfare against the 'West'.

That Germany became so fatally gas-dependent on Russia was, then, not down to structural conditions [62] but to German leaders' conscious political choices. It was not only due to the way German *Russlandpolitik* had evolved, but also rooted in Merkel's domestic political power play: her flawed environmental policy decision in the aftermath of the Fukushima accident in 2011 to rapidly phase out German nuclear power while also cutting reliance on coal to reduce CO2 emissions – all as she sought to garner green anti-nuclear voters for her next election bid in 2012.¹ Ten years on, the bitter irony could not be lost on anyone. Just as the vexed issues of sanctions against Russia and the certification and opening of Nord Stream 2 were on the negotiation table in early 2022, Germany was more reliant than ever before on much-polluting Russian fossil fuels for heating and power generation. All the while its last three remaining nuclear power plants were on track for shutdown [63, 64]. Herein lay Scholz's serious trilemma – having to balance environmental and socio-economic factors, as well as military and energy security.

Questions remain why over time united Germany's initial reinsurance policies [65 p180] vis-à-vis Russia increasingly faded from view while the focus began to shift dangerously to outright collaboration, and why this course found eager supporters across the entire political spectrum [66]. Equally, there are those, including well-known US political scientists, who believe that Germany and the West did actually do too little for Russia, and thereby may have emboldened Putin and perhaps even enabled his war [67-73].

Amid all these arguments it is worthwhile remembering that the stillbirth of Russian democracy, the stunted emergence of law and order, the economic chaos coupled with immense corruption, and the formation of a kleptocracy in the Yeltsin era, cannot simply be blamed on the quality of Germans' and other nations' policies of engagement with Russians. In the event, while unified Germany's post-Wall honeymoon with the Kremlin now looks foolish, to say the least, it is Putin's Russian state that has shown itself once more to be an 'empire by imposition' [74 p69] – a revisionist as much as revanchist power.

Scholz may well have fancied himself in the role as 'double interpreter', like Schmidt in 1980 talking to the man in the White House and the man in the Kremlin when superpower relations

¹ It was notable that as early as under chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Red-Green coalition government in 2000 Germany's nuclear phase-out by 2021 had been originally decided before being anchored in the law in 2002. Little changed when Angela Merkel from 2005 began to govern through the CDU-SPD grand coalition. In 2009, however, concerned about German economic competitiveness, climate protection goals, and energy security, her new CDU-FDP government sought the extension of the lifetime of German nuclear power plants by another 12 years (until 2033), before undertaking a sudden policy reversal due to the hypersensitivity and atomic angst awakened among the German electorate in the aftermath of the 2011 Japanese nuclear accident.

had totally broken down [44 ch5]. After all, in February 2022, Scholz (just as Macron) made a last-ditch effort to de-escalate the Russo-Ukrainian crisis and to thaw Russo-Western relations by rushing for personal talks to Moscow [75]. But Scholz did not have the clout of Schmidt, and the international circumstances were different and less advantageous.

Certainly, Putin was not to be deterred. He had long decided to go on the warpath; and for some time, US and UK intelligence had been busy issuing warnings. But somehow, as the world emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic with all the national and global societal and economic upheavals that the lockdowns had brought, to most, including Ukraine itself, War in Europe simply seemed inconceivable.

Thus came the day that shook the world: 24 February 2022, the day that Putin launched his military aggression. Russian tanks rolled, missiles were fired, and soldiers marched. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had begun. Diplomacy with Russia had died a sudden death. For the first time since 1945, great-power 'war of conquest' had returned to Europe [76] – the course of continent's history changed once more.

3. FROM WORDS TO DEEDS: PUTIN'S UKRAINE WAR AND SCHOLZ'S STICKY 'ZEITENWENDE'

Germany abruptly awoke from its slumber. The Scholz government was forced to re-evaluate Germany's role in international affairs and what this would mean for Germany's *Sonderverhältnis* with Russia, for its World War Two guilt, and for its '*nie wieder Krieg*' policy. The chancellor – who had risen to the top without trace, saying almost nothing of note on international affairs, and certainly had thus far not distinguished himself on the big questions of 'peace and war' – found himself under fierce scrutiny. While some pundits had criticised him for his diffidence and constrained leadership style, others blamed him for refusing leadership altogether.

Now, in the face of war, the German chancellor took a moment to consider his options, before, on 27 February, going on the offensive in the Bundestag. There, in the full glare of the world media, he declared a new era in German foreign policy: '*Zeitenwende*'. He spelled out Germany's intent to leave behind the country's post-Cold War negligence of military defence and its passivity in foreign affairs. Berlin would stand with its allies to deter and confront Putin's Russia. The policies of *Zeitenwende* thus represented a direct rejection of Berlin's (and previously Bonn's) *Moskaupolitik*.

In his revolutionary announcement the chancellor set forth a series of sanctions against Russia. He pledged an overhaul of the Bundeswehr, promising 'from now on' to invest more than two per cent of GDP in defence along NATO's spending target and to provide an emergency fund of €100 bn (\$113 bn) to implement this increase and to rearm Germany. He declared Berlin's commitment to new European armaments projects, all the while underscoring his country's continued role in nuclear sharing, underpinned by the purchase of new dual-use US F-35 fighter jets to replace the old American Tornados. Furthermore, breaking with Germany's post-war taboo on arms exports to war zones, he now proclaimed the supply of heavy weaponry to Ukraine, so that Kyiv could defend its sovereignty. Finally, he insisted Germany would strive for independence from Russian coal, oil, and gas [77].

With this *démarche*, Scholz – who that day received a standing ovation by almost all MPs – had at once seized the moment and produced a *fait accompli* in matters that had haunted post-Cold War German politics for almost three decades. Riding the wave of popular support during Europe's worst crisis since World War II, the chancellor united the long-sceptical leftist-pacifist strands within both the Social Democratic Party and the Greens, forcing them to accept an abrupt and complete German security policy reversal. And it seemed that Berlin was also willing to sacrifice its traditional order of policy priorities, namely the pursuit of its trade interests – including with autocratic regimes – over a foreign policy based on values and norms [78, 79].

The '*Zeitenwende*' speech was lauded as a historic milestone — at home as much as in the major NATO capitals where unified Germany's lack of a serious security policy has been lamented for years. Crucially, it seemed to indicate the emergence of a new, pragmatic Germany finally willing to take some responsibility for European security, and ready to act as a leading political power and provider of 'hard security' commensurate with its economic weight. There was a

genuine belief that Germany would now move on from its *Zivilmachtstatus* ('civilian' or 'civilising' power status), founded on the post-war strategic culture of military restraint that was coupled to specific constitutional limitations on the country's ability to use of force [80, 81].

Originally imposed by the victor powers on the then semi-sovereign Federal Republic, this tradition – despite some post-Wall legal amendments by the constitutional court on out-of-area deployments – had continued after 1990 when the country re-united and regained its full sovereignty. It is also noteworthy that in those negotiations of the 'Treaty on the final settlement' [82] of the German question, Germans had agreed to a future *Bundeswehr* that would operate at a reduced overall force size of 345,000 men and women and not be composed of the sum of its parts, i.e., of West and East German armed forces (some 545,000 plus 175,000 soldiers). By 2022, the size of *Bundeswehr* had further diminished, to around 182,000 soldiers. This reduction of German troops through the 1990s to the 2020s had not merely been a nod to post-war peace-making, or to alleviate Germany's neighbours' historic fears, but was also a conscious step in the effort 'to build a better', less conflictual post-Wall 'world' [83].

In the context of Russia's War of revanchist imperialism, Germany's 'culture of restraint' appeared anachronistic. Evidently, a moment of deep crisis was necessary to end German inertia. And perhaps only a Social Democrat chancellor could carry the left with him, as Berlin would begin its historic turn away from its traditional pacifist stance to renewed rearmament.

The psychological change that Scholz's speech demanded of the German population was certainly extraordinary. For Scholz's Social Democrats and many Greens it was a bitter pill to swallow, even before the €100 bn special defence fund was enshrined in the country's Basic Law in June 2022, voted through thanks to the backing of the conservatives [84, 85]. The severe tensions within and between the coalition parties that accompanied this politico-legal process may well have been one of the reasons why Scholz soon after his daring speech retreated back into his shell while resorting to defensive and at times cryptic communication, if not plain, awkward silences. Mindful of the past and others' suspicions, he certainly soon qualified his ideas on Germany's future military might in public. In a TIME magazine interview in April, he explained 'We have to be strong enough. Not so strong that we're a danger to our neighbours', he said, 'but strong enough' [86].

As a rule, Scholz clearly preferred for Germany to work within the EU and NATO 'framework for action' [87], as the chancellor liked to call it. In this vein, that spring he also did not travel alone to Kyiv, waiting instead for a joint summer trip alongside Macron and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi [88]. Meanwhile, President Volodymyr Zelensky abruptly uninvited his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), due to the latter's 'close [past] ties to Russia' when he had been foreign minister. To be sure, Steinmeier had acknowledged his 'mistake' of 'sticking' to Nord Stream 2 and of holding on to 'bridges that Russia no longer [itself] believed in, and of which our partners warned us'. But then he appeared to suggest joint blame in failing to build 'a common European home' [89] – when, we should note, the War had been Putin's decision alone and the destruction of the post-1991 European security order Russia's making. In this muddle of awkward and conflicting messaging as well as timid and plodding German military efforts, Scholz's perceived hesitant practical response to the War became widely criticised.

This is not to deny that since that day in late February 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has intermittently taken to the stage imploring fellow Europeans to stand firm and together against Russian aggression while reiterating his own promises on fostering deeper European defence integration and economic coordination [90]. Putin's actions have thus clearly revealed a second chancellor in Scholz – one who with his *Zeitenwende* speech showed that he was capable of being forceful and bold, of demonstrating resolve to pursue a radical political 'turn' (*Wende*). Indeed, there had always been more to the soft-spoken Hamburger than met the eye. Mocked in the 2021 election run-up by a catty conservative rival for his 'Smurf-like grin', Scholz had straight away retaliated: 'smurfs are small, crafty and always win' [91]. But beyond his wry humour and quick-wittedness, beyond the new authoritative rhetoric and determined tone emanating for Berlin, and beyond his unflappability and his quiet doggedness, it has to be said that few consequential deeds have followed the grand words.

Only after much dithering and many delays, did Berlin start shipping heavy weaponry to Ukraine, and it did everything to avoid trumpeting these moves. The shipments included sophisticated Panzerhaubitze 2000 with the air defence system Iris-T SLM, multiple rocket launchers MARS II,

and self-propelled anti-aircraft guns GEPARD. By the end of November 2022 all of this amounted to a value of some €2 bn, making Germany the third largest donor of military aid after the US and Britain [92]. In early January 2023, Germany in a coordinated effort with France and the United States, promised to supply Kyiv with Marder infantry fighting vehicles and Patriot anti-aircraft missile systems. And at the end of the month, after EU and NATO defence leaders had failed to resolve their dispute, when meeting at Ramstein Air Base, over battle-tank deliveries, Scholz came round to announcing he would send a company of Leopard 2A6 to Ukraine and to give the required authorisations to other European countries to do the same with their German-manufactured machines. ‘This decision’, the chancellor declared, ‘follows on from our official line to support Ukraine to the best of our ability. ... We are acting in close international coordination’ [93].

Scholz appeared to believe that he has acquitted himself well: stubbornly sticking to his secret Scholzian playbook, not bending to others’ demands, and never going out on a limb. As he explained afterwards in the Bundestag, he had done everything ‘right’ [94]. To be sure, on a profoundly controversial question, he ultimately kept the SPD and the coalition together; and he argued that he had managed to persuade the Americans to supply their Abrams 1 tanks for Ukraine’s defence efforts alongside Germany’s. Even so, it was Washington’s decision that ended the international cacophony of demands expressed at Ramstein and unlocked the total paralysis in the chancellery and thereby the German shipments in the first place. As a result, Biden succinctly but joyfully proclaimed that Europe was ‘fully, thoroughly, totally united’ [95].

Scholz’s narrative is obviously pointing to short-term gains. And his partners and allies are mainly relieved that for the sake of projecting alliance cohesion, he finally gave them what they had wanted. Because many believe that this is likely just the first of more western escalatory steps in support of Kyiv, as Putin’s war of attrition, is expected to continue. Scholz’s biggest test regarding military help to Ukraine, therefore, is likely yet to come.

As we look ahead as much as back to the *Zeitenwende* speech, the chancellor’s own vision fails to take into account the long-term fall-out from his actions: the decline of Germany’s influence in Europe and also the continent’s profound transformation because of the Ukraine war. Indeed, as RUSI-co-director Jonathan Eyal has argued, the ‘continent’s strategic centre of gravity has shifted decisively from its western tip, where Germany and France used to decide matters, and towards central and eastern Europe’. For it has been the growing pressure especially from Baltic states, the Poles, and the Finns that has forced Berlin to make choices on weapons deliveries. ‘These nations have gained moral authority because they were far more lucid and realistic about the danger of an imperial Russia’ and were now also ‘exercising a more direct and practical influence over the continent’s decision-making’ [96].

At home, Olaf Scholz with his *Zeitenwende* speech had daringly reintroduced his nation to the language of war – a language that after 1990 was displaced almost entirely by the language of trade. Given Germans deep-seated fears of their country being dragged into a seemingly distant war, amazingly, by late January 2023 some 44 per cent of the population appeared to be in favour of sending battle tanks to Ukraine, with 45 per cent opposed [97]. None of this should be deemed a mean feat, considering that Scholz had hardly prepared himself to be a ‘foreign policy’ let alone a ‘war chancellor’.

Generally, the electorate revealed itself nonetheless disillusioned with the *Ampel* on its first anniversary: 64 per cent of German voters were dissatisfied with the work of the coalition (vs 36 per cent the previous year) and 58 per cent were unhappy with the chancellor’s performance (vs 22 per cent in 2021). And a year into the War, only a quarter of voters considered him a strong leader [98]. What’s more, Germany’s allies and European neighbours – unsure of Berlin’s future foreign policies and future strategic choices – are frustrated, too. Even though, as if to reassure itself, the Scholz government is feverishly writing Germany’s first-ever national security strategy.

The cold reality simply is that the process of transformative change in Germany has barely begun. Germans know, that as a nation, they will have to practise thinking and acting in a new threat environment; that in a ‘time of war, violence and displacement’ which, as President Steinmeier put it, might ‘spread around Europe like a wildfire’, they must commit themselves once more to proactive deterrence and defence [99]. But it cannot be ignored that in 2022 the

NATO two per cent spending target was missed again, the schedule on *Bundeswehr* reforms has been delayed, and the complex and fragile coalition is still arguing over how to best spend the €100 bn special fund [100]. All this led Latvia's Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Artis Pabriks openly to doubt whether Germans would defend their NATO allies. 'We are ready to die', he said. 'Are you?' [101] His trust in Germany was 'close to zero' [102].

On 'security' issues Germany by and large has continued to seek cover under the umbrella of multilateralism while looking to others to make the strategic big forward leaps – because, Scholz believes, in this arena there just cannot be any German going-it-alones (*Alleingänge*). Consequently, the public perception of the Federal Republic as economically domineering and as a free rider in matters of defence remains unchanged and the paradox is unresolved of, on the one hand, too little and, on the other, too much self-assertion and emancipation.

Though clearly sensing an externally imposed compulsion (*Zwang*) for Germany to lead from the front and to take on new responsibilities in accordance with its central position and economic might, Berlin under Scholz has struggled for any real political impact in the European arena and on the global stage. In the end, for fear of his party, of a fissiparous coalition, and of losing the chancellery, he has thus far largely ended up taking decisions under duress and external pressure.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The first year after Merkel, 2022, was therefore one of forced reinvention for Scholz and Germany. Though he did not want to be seen as a mere follower or temporizer, his actions – as he adapted his foreign policy-responses from peacetime to wartime chancellor – were always those of a beleaguered leader, unable to shake the age-old constraints tied to history, geography, and party politics. Seeing him as more reactive than pro-active, Ukrainians in June 2022 coined the term 'scholzing' («шольцовать») [103] to express their exasperation with the German chancellor's hesitancy in supporting their defence efforts and what they perceived as his empty promises [104].² For all his rhetorical efforts to produce a major German foreign policy revolution – underlined by his December 2022 Foreign Affairs essay, in which he expanded his originally domestic '*Zeitenwende*' notion to that of a 'global' turning point [105] – his natural quiet caution (reflected in long bouts of silences), his stubbornness, and the structural limitations, that Germany has always faced, did act as breaks.

German war guilt, the effects of the '*nie wieder Krieg*' policy coupled with '*Zivilmachtstatus*', and the legacies of the Russo-German '*Sonderverhältnis*' plus the perennial complications of German coalition politics have all continued to check Germany's room for manoeuvre. As have its neighbours' never-ending suspicion of German uses of its clout – economic, political and potentially military. And yet, for all these constraints that all post-war German chancellors have in some form or other been grappling with, it must be noted that there have been those who did step up and who showed great zeal to shape international affairs from day one. Under Schmidt, for example, an institutionally integrated and semi-sovereign West Germany did not stand in the background during a crisis-ridden decade. Instead, in matters of 'hard security' he managed to pursue openly a policy that both sought to enhance the Alliance's defence and deterrence posture vis-à-vis an obstreperous Soviet Union, all the while continuing efforts to push for nuclear arms reduction. This led to the famous NATO dual track decision of 1979, which earned the Federal Republic international respect and even a seat at the top table of the western nuclear powers.

Confronted with the War – and with the current strongman in the Kremlin determined to sever the transatlantic bonds that have sustained not only Western Europe but also the Federal Republic since the 1940s – Germany, if it truly wants to lead in Europe, must ensure that its *Zeitenwende* is implemented and endures. Scholz will have to keep a potentially increasingly war-weary public and its neighbours and allies on board. He will have to be visible and vocal, tenacious, and consistent in his approach, as he takes on the new responsibilities that have

² In similar vein, Ukrainians also expressed their frustrations with France. During spring 2022 they had therefore invented the verb 'macroning' («макронить») – a description of a person who pretends to be very concerned about something but refuses to do anything substantial to help. Specifically, it was shorthand for President Macron's repeated phone calls made in vain [107].

fallen upon Germany in a changing world. Therefore, if he wants to be successful and sustain a Europe ‘whole and free’ [106], he must communicate clearly and fearlessly and embark on energetic forward-looking steps. Above all, faced with China’s growing peacemaker ambitions in Europe, he must press hard for a process that will allow him – in tandem especially with America and France – to build a new post-war continent at peace with itself.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Kristina Spohr

London School of Economics, UK

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