



Michał M. Kosman¹

Germany's national security strategy in the context of *Zeitenwende*

SUMMARY The article examines German foreign and security policy in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The study aims to track Germany's reaction to the conflict in Eastern Europe, which prompted significant changes in its foreign policy due to the deteriorating security situation on the continent. This shift, highlighted by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's speech three days after the Russian military operations began, became known as *Zeitenwende*. The analysis covers political, military, and economic aspects. Additionally, the article discusses the German National Security Strategy, adopted in June 2023, which addresses the new security environment and is the first document of its kind in Germany's history. The study employs document analysis and literature review in both German and Polish.

KEYWORDS German foreign policy, German National Security Strategy, *Zeitenwende*, Ukraine, Russia

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 drastically altered the landscape of international politics within Europe and the Euro-Atlantic space. This act marked the culmination of a gradual shift in international relations that had been unfolding over the previous several years. The optimism that followed the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s had all but vanished. The belief in adhering to international law, respecting borders, and resolving

¹ Michał M. Kosman Dr. hab., University Professor, Faculty of Political Science and Administration, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, e-mail: m.kosman@ukw.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-1966-9658.

disputes peacefully – predominantly held by Europeans who had lived in peace for decades within an integrated continental space – disintegrated when confronted with the realist paradigm's core principles, namely, the use of force as the driving force in state security policy.

The beginnings of this creeping shift in thinking about international relations can be traced to around the midpoint of the first decade of the 21st century that for the first time showed the increasing tendency of the Russian Federation to restore its weakened post-Soviet superpower status. Moscow had previously expressed disapproval of Western actions, such as NATO's successive enlargements starting in 1999, the NATO operation against Yugoslavia also in 1999, the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003, and support for the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. This dissatisfaction was loudly voiced in President Vladimir Putin's famous speech at the annual Munich Security Conference in 2007. There, the Russian leader sharply criticized Western countries for these actions, although his main target was the United States and its propensity for unilateral resolution of conflicts.

The following year saw further escalation in the international situation, primarily due to three events. First, the declaration of Kosovo's independence in February, aimed at *de jure* secession from Serbia, which was met with sharp Kremlin criticism as Russia consistently sided with its ally Serbia (Asmus, 2010). Second, the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, where Ukraine and Georgia received vague yet literal promises of future NATO membership. Third, the brief Russo-Georgian war, which can be seen as Russia's reaction to these events and an attempt to destabilize Georgia, thereby affecting its NATO membership prospects. While the short conflict with Georgia somewhat tarnished Russia's image in the West, relations with Moscow quickly returned to business as usual. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a larger shock, leading to moderate sanctions on Russia, but it did not fundamentally alter the pre-existing relationships, especially regarding the supply of Russian resources to Western Europe. It was only the open attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, that caused a significant reorientation of major Western countries, including Germany, towards Russia.

The early post-Cold War Western European geopolitical speculations that envisioned Russia playing a crucial role in supporting international stability proved to be misguided. Russia, of course, has its own perspective on the evolution of international politics over the past three decades, blaming NATO and the United States for security disruptions – particularly NATO's eastern expansion, unilateral actions in military conflicts (such as Kosovo and Iraq), and

NATO's presence in Ukraine (mainly through American advisors before February 2022). From Russia's viewpoint, halting further NATO expansion (potentially including Ukraine and Georgia) appears as a defensive strategy in geopolitical terms (Kissinger, 2017, pp. 53–62; Marshall, 2015, pp. 25–57).

Meanwhile, after reunification, Germany underwent a gradual evolution in its perception of international security policy. It demonstrated significant assertiveness early on by independently recognizing the statehood of Croatia and Slovenia in December 1991 (Kosman, 2017, pp. 429–466; Koszel, 1999, pp. 243–266). During NATO's intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999, the new SPD and Green government firmly sided with American allies, indicating a significant ideological shift within the traditionally pacifist Green and Social Democratic circles.

For Germany, Russia was always seen as a crucial stabilizing element in international security, a significant partner, or even a “strategic” partner. Particularly important was the Russia's role as an exporter of energy resources to Germany, primarily providing relatively cheap natural gas to fuel the German export-oriented economy. This strategy was based on the belief that integrating Russia into the European economic bloodstream would also help stabilize political relations. This hope was not shaken even by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – shortly after, in the following year, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline agreement was signed (Westphal, 2021). It was only the Russian invasion of Ukraine in April 2022 that triggered a dramatic shift in Berlin's policy towards Russia, known as *Zeitenwende*. One manifestation of this turning point and perhaps a departure from the tradition of a “civilian power” (*Zivilmacht*) is the National Security Strategy announced in mid-2023, the first such document in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. Its key contents will be analyzed in this study. It can be hypothesized that the Russian military actions against Ukraine have catalyzed a lasting transformation in Germany's security policy. The most striking elements of this transformation include a radical change in the perception of Russia (from a potential stabilizer to a disruptor of international order) and the gradual reduction of reluctance to use force for stabilizing the international security environment (moving away from its role as a *Zivilmacht*).

The announcement of *Zeitenwende* and the debate surrounding the concept

The German government responded quickly to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On February 27, 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered a pivotal speech, which brought the term *Zeitenwende* (loosely translated as “epochal turning point” or “epochal shift”) into widespread public discourse. This speech highlighted several objectives of the German government in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict:

- Supporting Ukraine, including through arms supplies;
- Intensifying sanctions against Russia to halt military actions;
- Preventing the conflict from spreading to other countries;
- Confirming NATO alliance guarantees;
- Increasing defense spending, including the creation of a special fund of 100 billion euros over the coming years;
- Strengthening the cohesion of the European Union’s foreign policy (Die Bundesregierung, 2022).

The initial reactions identified the promised breakthrough primarily in the military sphere, likely due to the spectacular announcement of an additional 100 billion euro defense fund. However, the public and expert debate that began to unfold around the concept of *Zeitenwende* started to include political and economic aspects.

Regarding the military aspects of *Zeitenwende*, the focus was on strengthening the Bundeswehr through annual budgets and the aforementioned special fund (*Sondervermögen*) of 100 billion euros. Expert analyses had long highlighted significant deficiencies in this area. The most serious problems included chronic underfunding of the armed forces and an improper distribution of expenditures – allocating too much of the defense ministry’s resources to personnel costs and too little to armaments. Berlin had also failed to meet the NATO-mandated spending level of 2% of GDP on defense. Experts recommended a steady increase in the defense ministry’s annual budgets, especially for short – and medium-term projects, and the use of the special fund for long-term projects (Mölling & Schütz, 2022). There were also opinions that the additional funds would not be sufficient to make up for years of neglect in the armed forces, including heavy equipment such as transport helicopters, fighter jets, ships, as well as ammunition, protective equipment, and communication systems (Metzger,

2022). These expert considerations were accompanied by legislative work, culminating in the adoption of a law on Bundeswehr financing in July 2022. The law included the mentioned amount of 100 billion euros to help achieve the NATO spending target of 2% of GDP on defense and specified mechanisms for spending implementation (*Bundesgesetzblatt*, 2022).

Despite the adoption of this law in mid-2022, the pace of work on the military aspects of *Zeitenwende* was deemed unsatisfactory in the following months. This likely contributed to the resignation of Defense Minister Christina Lambrecht and the appointment of Boris Pistorius in January 2023 (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2023).

The military support for Ukraine cannot be discussed without mentioning Germany's significant evolution from initial restraint – symbolized by the much-publicized promise to send 5,000 helmets to Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict – to becoming a major donor of aid to Ukraine. As of mid-December 2023, military aid since the conflict's beginning amounted to 5.66 billion euros, with total German aid to Ukraine and its refugees at 27.8 billion euros (*Presse – und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung*, 2023). Detailed data on various categories of armaments and equipment can be found at the Bundeswehr's website.

Economic issues became another important element of the debate around *Zeitenwende*. The main challenges in this area were related to strong dependence on energy resource supplies from Russia, especially natural gas. In 2021, 55% of Germany's natural gas imports came from Russia. The first decades of the 21st century also saw closer ownership ties between the energy companies of both countries and the construction of the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines through the Baltic Sea. Although the invasion of Ukraine destroyed the achievements of the German-Russian energy partnership, the scale of dependence on Russian supplies meant that their immediate cessation would pose a serious problem for the German economy and households. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock emphasized this during a meeting with business circles, while stressing the determination to quickly wean Germany off unreliable exporters (*Bulletin der Bundesregierung*, 2022). It is no surprise, then, that Berlin reacted cautiously to calls for an immediate halt to Russian gas supplies, formulated by some EU countries. Germany was forced to accelerate the search for alternative sources when Russian authorities gradually reduced gas supplies through Nord Stream, halted them in August, and a mysterious explosion in September 2022 destroyed this pipeline and one line of the yet-to-be-commissioned Nord Stream 2. Berlin took appropriate internal measures (mechanisms

to reduce gas consumption in various sectors of the economy, support packages for households and businesses, control of Russian assets in the fuel sectors) and external actions (interventionist gas purchases on foreign markets and storage) (Kwiatkowska, 2023, pp. 24–26). Noteworthy achievements include the rapid commissioning of floating LNG terminals in Wilhelmshaven in December 2022, Lubmin in January 2023 (*Frankfurter allgemeine Zeitung*, 2023), Brunsbüttel in March 2023, and Stade in December 2023. In 2023, the main gas suppliers to Germany became Norway (43%), the Netherlands (26%), and Belgium (22%) (Federal Network Agency data: Rückblick).

Politically, *Zeitenwende* entailed a departure from the partnership – sometimes even a “strategic” partnership – with Moscow, which had been declared for some time after the end of the Cold War. Russia ceased to be defined as a partner in solving international security problems and was instead seen as a threat to the international order. Additionally, signals of willingness to take greater responsibility for international affairs began to appear during the preparations for the National Security Strategy.

National Security Strategy – selected issues

In the coalition agreement of the SPD, Alliance ‘90/The Greens, and FDP from December 7, 2021, the adoption of the National Security Strategy was planned within the first year of the government’s term (SPD, 2021, p. 114). This was intended to be the first document of its kind in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. However, the anticipated timeline was not met. The delay was primarily due to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, which prompted German political elites to engage in deeper strategic reflection and a radical shift in the perception of the international security environment, encapsulated in the term *Zeitenwende*. Additionally, the continuity of work on the strategy was likely hindered by assessments and reservations directed at Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht, her subsequent resignation, and the appointment of the dynamic and popular Boris Pistorius as her successor. Another reason for the delay was inter-institutional disputes over certain contents of the document, mainly between the Chancellery and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly regarding the institutional subordination of the planned National Security Council (which was ultimately not established) (*Zeit Online*, 2023).

The 76-page National Security Strategy was finally adopted on June 14, 2023. Besides the customary introduction by Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Foreign

Minister Annalena Baerbock, and a comprehensive summary, the document consists of several sections. The first section is titled *Germany in Europe and the World* [*Deutschland in Europa und in der Welt*]. It emphasizes Germany's particular responsibility, as the country with the largest demographic and economic potential, for peace, security, prosperity, and stability on the continent. It also recalls Germany's responsibility for the tragedy of World War II and the benefits of peace brought by European integration. The document reaffirms Germany's commitment to the Euro-Atlantic vector of its foreign policy – NATO and the European Union, along with its Common Foreign and Security Policy. This section highlights the importance of cooperation with two allied countries: France and the United States. A significant new element compared to previous policy documents since the end of the Cold War is the clear definition of Russia as “the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is a blatant violation of the United Nations Charter and of the cooperative European security order. Its aim is to destroy the state sovereignty, territorial integrity, cultural identity and political existence of a peaceful neighbour and to give effect to an imperialistic policy of spheres of influence. By thus wrecking the European peaceful order, Russia is directly threatening our security and that of our allies in NATO and the EU”. The authors express that Germany and its allies do not seek confrontation with Russia but are ready and able to defend their sovereignty and freedom. Russia is accused of deliberately seeking to destabilize European societies and weaken NATO and the EU (Die Bundesregierung, 2023, pp. 22–23).

The Strategy also devotes significant attention to China, described as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. The authors note that in recent years, the competitive and rival elements have gained prominence in China's foreign policy. The document underscores China's growing tendency to change the international order in its favor, using increasingly offensive tools that particularly disrupt regional stability. It states that China uses its economic power to achieve political goals. Nevertheless, the document also contains conciliatory tones, acknowledging that China remains an important partner without whom it will be impossible to address major global challenges, and cooperation should be sought in resolving the most serious crises. This reflects a similar description that accompanied Russia in numerous policy documents in previous years.

Among other significant security challenges for Germany and Europe, the Strategy mentions crises and conflicts in Europe's neighborhood – Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel. It emphasizes the threat of terrorism

and extremism, which can undermine democratic social order, for example by the public dissemination of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Another threat involves the weakening of the arms control regime, particularly the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Also highlighted are the destructive role of North Korea, developing nuclear armament and delivery programs, and Iran's nuclear ambitions. Proliferation threats also include biological and chemical weapons. Other mentioned threats include the weakening of the existing economic and financial order.

Economic security also features prominently in the Strategy. The authors note that the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed Germany's economic dependencies in critical sectors. This particularly applies to goods such as semiconductors, medical products, and raw materials. The Strategy places strong emphasis on the resilience of cyberspace and protection against espionage and organized crime.

The Strategy gives special attention to issues arising from climate change and its consequences for the world and Germany – desertification of various areas, extreme weather events, growing social inequalities, famines, migrations, etc. Addressing these issues would require more intensive investment in green transformation and renewable energy sources (Die Bundesregierung, 2023, pp. 23–29).

In the section titled *Integrated Security for Germany* [*Integrierte Sicherheit für Deutschland*], the Strategy focuses on improving defense capabilities by strengthening the Bundeswehr, European defense industries, the European pillar of NATO, and the alliance's deterrence capabilities. At the same time, Germany advocates for measures to reduce the risk of conflicts, especially through nuclear arms control. Reflecting pacifist traditions, the Strategy asserts that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must therefore never be fought” (*ibid.*, p. 32). The Strategy confirms previous commitments to reach NATO's average annual defense spending target of 2% of GDP within a few years.

Besides NATO, the European Union should also play a crucial role in enhancing continental security through the instruments of the Common Security and Defense Policy. Key in this regard is stabilizing the EU's neighborhood. The Strategy advocates for continued support for Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders in the conflict with Russia, the continuation of EU sanctions against Russia, and stresses the necessity to prevent the conflict from spreading to other countries (*ibid.*, p. 36). Maintaining communication channels with Russia at both civilian and military levels should be an important tool for reducing the risk of conflicts. Among neighbors, France is particularly highlighted

as a partner with which Germany shares the responsibility for driving European integration. The Strategy also includes traditional support for the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Additionally, Berlin supports the reform of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and expresses readiness for the Bundeswehr's engagement in international stabilization efforts within the EU and UN frameworks (*ibid.*, pp. 37–45).

The next section, titled *Resilient: Securing Our Values through Internal Strength* [*Resilient: Die Sicherung unserer Werte durch innere Stärke*], focuses on axiological, informational, and other aspects of enhancing resilience to threats. It emphasizes the need to counter hybrid threats and disinformation by strengthening independent media. A corresponding strategy will be developed for this purpose. The Strategy reaffirms Germany's readiness to take on greater responsibility for international security and to seek a permanent seat on the UN Security Council as part of any potential reform (*ibid.*, p. 50). The final section of the document includes extensive provisions on human rights protection, resource security, cybersecurity, space security, combating hunger, pandemics, and the climate crisis.

Conclusions

A review of the concept of *Zeitenwende* and its integration into Germany's National Security Strategy allows us to draw several conclusions. *Zeitenwende* signifies a transformative shift in Germany's foreign and security policy, encompassing a broad interpretation of security that includes not only military dimensions but also economic aspects. It integrates foreign policy, security sector reform, defense, and economic policies, particularly in energy.

In the military domain, *Zeitenwende* is exemplified by efforts to modernize the armed forces. This initiative is supported by annual defense budgets and a special multi-year fund of 100 billion euros. Experts suggest that modernizing the military and enhancing Germany's defense capabilities will be a prolonged and challenging process, requiring significant financial investment, prudent resource management, and strategic planning. The most immediate effects of *Zeitenwende* are observable in the economic realm, particularly in reducing Germany's dependence on Russian energy supplies and commissioning LNG terminals.

Politically, *Zeitenwende* could lead to an increased sense of responsibility for addressing international security issues, as highlighted in the National Security Strategy. The most significant shift thus far is the redefinition of Russia from

a partner in international security to the primary threat to European security. However, the ultimate direction of Germany's policy towards Russia remains uncertain and will depend on various external factors (such as the progression of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, political developments within Russia, and the U.S. stance post-2024 presidential elections) and internal dynamics.

Internally, a critical factor will be the resilience of German society to economic and social challenges (such as rising prices and the difficulties faced by businesses previously reliant on Russian trade), which may be perceived by some as consequences of severing economic and political ties with Moscow. The government's ability to address these issues will be crucial, as deteriorating public sentiment could bolster support for populist forces, particularly the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has shown sympathy towards Russia and has risen to become the second-largest party in polls (19.5%) after the Christian Democrats (34%) as of January 2024 (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2024). Additionally, there may be growing "fatigue" with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in a society deeply ingrained with pacifist values since World War II. Conversely, significant protests in January 2024 against the far-right, including the AfD, indicate strong public opposition to extremist views.

Other parties with pro-Russian sympathies, such as The Left and the newly formed alliance led by Sahra Wagenknecht (formerly of The Left), currently fall below the five-percent electoral threshold (as of January 2024). Internal divisions within the SPD regarding Russia policy, managed so far by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who supports aiding Ukraine (Malinowski, 2022), also complicate the situation. Evaluating Germany's actions – initial caution in supplying heavy weapons to Ukraine and the refusal to send Taurus missiles capable of striking Russian targets in January 2024 – suggests that Germany is cautious about completely severing diplomatic ties with Russia, maintaining flexibility for potentially negotiating an end or suspension of the conflict in the future.

If this interpretation of Berlin's intentions is accurate, it suggests that Berlin acknowledges the geopolitical reality of Russia's enduring presence as the European Union's eastern neighbor, necessitating the establishment of some form of relations with this country.

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Narodowa strategia bezpieczeństwa Niemiec z 2023 r. w warunkach *Zeitenwende*

STRESZCZENIE Przedmiotem artykułu jest niemiecka polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeństwa w obliczu rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę w lutym 2022 r. Celem opracowania jest prześledzenie reakcji Niemiec na konflikt we wschodniej Europie, który stanowił zasadniczy impuls zapowiedzi rewolucyjnych zmian w niemieckiej polityce zagranicznej w reakcji na wyraźne pogorszenie się stanu bezpieczeństwa na kontynencie. Ów przełom – za sprawą słynnego przemówienia kanclerza Olafa Scholza trzy dni po rozpoczęciu rosyjskich działań zbrojnych – utrwalił się w szerokim odbiorze pod hasłem *Zeitenwende*. Jest on przedmiotem analizy w aspektach politycznym, militarnym i ekonomicznym. Omówiona została także uchwalona w czerwcu 2023 r. i uwzględniająca nowe realia środowiska bezpieczeństwa niemiecka Narodowa strategia bezpieczeństwa – pierwszy takiej rangi dokument w historii RFN. W niniejszym artykule została wykorzystana metoda badania dokumentów oraz literatury w językach niemieckim i polskim.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE niemiecka polityka zagraniczna, Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Niemiec, *Zeitenwende*, Ukraina, Rosja

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