

How Committed is Germany to a *Zeitenwende* in Defence?

A year after Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a significant shift in German defence policy, referred to as a *Zeitenwende*, during a special session of the Bundestag addressing Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine, the ramifications continue to unfold. Scholz's speech marked a historic turning point, as Germany witnessed the collapse of its long-standing strategic thinking encapsulated in the so-called "Wandel-durch-Handel" principle, which advocated for engagement through trade and cultural exchanges as a means to promote peace and bring about political change.

Putin's war of aggression shattered this principle's underlying assumption, compelling Scholz to announce some of the most profound policy reversals in post-war German history. The Chancellor committed to bolstering investments in the nation's armed forces, the Bundeswehr, while also providing military support to Ukraine and imposing joint EU sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, Germany began reforms to its energy policy and began reviewing its trade relationships with autocratic regimes such as China. In addition, Scholz's government successfully countered Putin apologists and voices pushing for Ukraine to cede territory to Russia in exchange for peace promises. In essence, the Chancellor pledged that Germany would assume a more proactive stance in defending Europe and safeguarding the liberal international order.

However, the progress of these initiatives has encountered significant delays and faced obstacles, resulting in a difficult and sluggish pace. While policies have been adopted on key decisions, the implementation has fallen short on multiple fronts due to various factors. Pre-existing constraints and effective strategies have hindered the government's ability to achieve desired outcomes. Germany is faced with reckoning with years of underinvestment in its armed forces and inadequate structures and

processes, which, combined with a shift in the political debate, present a significant challenge for the country.

Gaps in military capabilities

Germany's combat readiness has raised serious concerns and needs significant investments and comprehensive reforms. The Bundeswehr faces severe deficiencies in equipment, and its operational capabilities are in dire need of modernisation. The country's military stocks have reached alarmingly **low** levels, so Germany could only sustain combat operations for a few days, well below NATO's standard of 30 days. This situation would undoubtedly pose significant challenges in the event of a war. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has further strained Germany's stocks by providing equipment and capabilities to support Kyiv.

Since the end of the Cold War, successive governments have drastically **reduced** the capabilities of the Bundeswehr. The army has experienced a staggering decline of almost 65% in its personnel, while the number of weapons systems has also been significantly reduced. From a fleet of approximately 5000 main battle tanks, only a mere 300 remain to defend the country. The number of jet fighters has been more than halved, and the Navy has 18 submarines and two frigates. In addition, troop deployments face a shortage of military air transport capabilities, sometimes resorting to using civilian flights to send servicemen and women to theatres of operation.

Furthermore, Germany's army continues to rely on outdated, highly vulnerable technologies. For instance, the forces still employ 40-year-old analogue radios, which are easily **intercepted**, possess short

range, and have lower power. This not only impairs the ability to maintain seamless communication but also presents a serious risk to Germany's command and control capabilities and the overall performance of the Bundeswehr's Battle Management System.

To address these critical shortcomings, Germany must significantly increase defence spending to complete the modernisation of its army and obtain sufficient capabilities. Recognising the importance of cutting-edge capabilities and technologies, Scholz's government should allocate adequate resources and expedite the implementation of modernisation programmes. Structural factors exacerbate this issue, adding another layer of complexity to investments and procurements.

Structural Challenges Hinder Progress

The conflict in Ukraine has triggered a strategic shift and led Berlin's allies to urge the country to enhance its involvement in European defence and provide more significant support to Kyiv. Until today, Germany has benefited from a favourable position characterised by a strong economy, affordable energy, and security guarantees from the United States and NATO. However, the country's "free-riding", a **consequence** of resource and capability sharing within the Alliance, has drawn criticism from other member states. NATO's second-largest economy could have made greater contributions. Instead, Berlin systematically reduced funding for its military while maintaining naïve engagement with authoritarian regimes such as Russia.

Public spending in Germany faces limitations imposed by the "**debt brake**", a principle designed to restrict structural deficits and safeguard the economy from overbearing debt. Enshrined in the country's constitution, this rule significantly impacts the ability of Scholz's government to increase defence spending and make necessary investments. Adhering to his party's political line and the constitutional rule, Finance Minister Christian Lindner of the Free Democrats party has emphasised his intention to respect this budget cap. To compensate for the lack of financial resources, he has used **special funds**. Nevertheless, this approach still constrains the state's capacity to fund defence programmes adequately

and creates trade-offs in investment decisions across various governmental branches and priorities.

The challenges associated with public procurement in Germany further complicate the investment process in defence capabilities. A study conducted by the OECD **explained** that "stakeholders [...] reported that they saw procurement as an administrative burden that was best to be avoided at all costs". This perspective contrasts with global approaches, where public procurement is seen as an essential tool for implementing policies and achieving strategic objectives. The Bundeswehr has long **advocated** for the German government to "significantly simplify public procurement law" as a necessary step to facilitate the efficient and expedient modernisation of the army and its equipment. Concrete measures, such as the regrouping and restructuring decision-making processes, have been proposed to address these bureaucratic obstacles. However, despite the pressing security realities in Europe, increasing investment in defence continues to face significant difficulties.

The combination of the debt brake and challenges in public procurement present an important barrier to Germany's ability to allocate resources for its defence effectively and swiftly. It necessitates innovative approaches and comprehensive reforms to streamline the procurement process, remove administrative burdens, and create a more agile and responsive defence investment framework.

David McAllister

Member of the European Parliament and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee

If the 'Zeitenwende', which the German Chancellor so proudly pronounced last year, actually is to deliver on its promises, the Federal Government needs to design a strategy, coordinated with our partners, to provide systematic military and civilian support to Ukraine.

This ought to entail a **viable concept for logistics, training and maintenance**. Following the delivery of armaments, **national stocks need to be replenished quickly, the precondition for which are a restructured Bundeswehr and a reformed procurement system**. Simply spending

more (credit-financed) money will not do the trick for the problems the Bundeswehr is facing. **Personnel changes in key positions** are at least as important as increasing financial resources for our armed forces.

Last but not least, the Federal Government needs to **finalise the National Security Strategy**, which has long been promised but not yet delivered. This is overdue! Germany needs to define its strategic goals. Only then can we provide clarity internally and be a reliable partner externally.

The Political Debate on Defence in Germany

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has profoundly impacted the political discourse in Germany, sparking discussions and debates regarding key policies for reforming the country's defence.

One significant challenge lies in Germany's historical discomfort with military power since World War II (WWII) ended. The country's Nazi past has deeply influenced mentalities and politics, leading to a general aversion to the use of military force. Recent **cases** of right-wing extremism and seditious plots within the armed forces have fed this mistrust and scepticism. Moreover, recent larger-scale demonstrations in central Berlin opposing the provision of more weapons to Ukraine highlight the significant portion of the population that remains opposed to the country's new defence policy. Almost a century after the end of WWII, it remains difficult to change this defence culture. Against this profound challenge, Germany has **displayed** reluctance to take the initiative and assume leadership in supporting Ukraine, instead deferring to the United States to take the lead. This was very apparent in Scholz's government's decision-making process to send the Leopard II tanks to Ukraine: he conditioned the contribution to the participation of Washington and the provision of Abrams tanks. This behaviour has led experts to **label** the country a "reluctant hegemon" with a "leadership-avoidance complex".

The second obstacle to reforming Germany's defence policy is the country's political commitment to fiscal austerity. Increasing spending has long been a red

line for several political parties. Last year, Finance Minister Christian Lindner opposed increasing defence spending, citing the need to comply with the "debt brake" law that limits deficit spending. Despite Germany facing significant challenges in key areas such as the economy, energy, and security, the government prioritises maintaining a balanced budget instead of reforming and adapting national spending to face the new realities. This further complicates policymaking and implementation processes.

These challenges, rooted in Germany's history and financial austerity measures, pose significant hurdles to the reform of the country's defence policy. They reinforce obstacles posed by the bureaucracy leading to challenges in allocating and procuring funds. Overcoming these obstacles requires a delicate balance between addressing historical sensitivities and ensuring that national security interests are adequately met. It necessitates robust public dialogue, leadership commitment, and a nuanced approach to align Germany's policies with the evolving security landscape.

Roland Freudenstein

Vice President and Head of GLOBSEC Brussels

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Germany has come a long way in its defence and security posture, as well as its policies on Ukraine and Russia. This entails a serious commitment to rearm Germany through much higher defence spending, as well as military assistance to Ukraine, which became equal to Poland's, and overall support (military, financial, and humanitarian) that ranks third behind only the UK and the US.

According to Scholz, Russia must not win, and Ukraine must not lose, and any military escalation must be avoided, especially a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia. This is to be achieved through a technique of incrementally increasing military support for Ukraine (nicknamed 'boiling the frog'), which has led to enormous delays in the help that was possible much earlier.

Finally, Scholz believes he needs to take into account German public opinion (which is split

on weapons deliveries) and also the strong pacifist and classically pro-Russian thinking in his own party, the SPD. All this, in Scholz's eyes, underscores the need for *Besonnenheit* (level-headedness) that results in never doing nearly as much as Germany's partners rightfully expect in rearming the Bundeswehr and in delivering weapons to Ukraine. Germany is changing on defence and security as well as Ukraine and Russia, but much too slowly at the moment.

Challenges and Progress: Navigating One Year of Change

Despite encountering numerous obstacles, the German government is demonstrating a commitment to achieving progress. Initiated by Scholz's discourse and driven by the circumstances, the government has introduced several measures to bolster its defence capabilities.

The recently appointed Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has brought about a notable increase in support for Ukraine, recognising the importance of standing in solidarity with the country in the ongoing conflict. Moreover, there have been promising developments at the domestic level. Chancellor Scholz's recent **commitment** to inscribe NATO's target of allocating 2% of GDP for defence spending in the upcoming revised National Security Strategy demonstrates a significant shift in Berlin's approach. So far, Germany has fallen short of meeting this objective, with defence spending **averaging** 1,2% of its GDP. These developments represent crucial steps towards reinforcing the country's defence capabilities and fulfilling its obligations within the NATO Alliance.

Nevertheless, progress is occurring sluggishly, and Germany's allies are increasingly becoming frustrated with Berlin's perceived lack of urgency in the face of war in Europe and escalating global tensions. Despite a larger budget pledged to the army for 2022, the funds have yet to be **received** due to the arduous bureaucracy and procurement procedures. In addition, Germany's commitment to reinforce Baltic states with troop deployments has not fully met the expectations of these nations. Despite having a

brigade on standby within Germany, it has not been deployed to Lithuania, considered one of the most vulnerable points on the Alliance's Eastern flank. This situation compromises the readiness and deterrence capabilities of the flank against a potential Russian attack.

While the German government has taken significant steps, much work must be done to address concerns and expedite progress. Only through decisive action and proactive measures can the Scholz government effectively strengthen the country's defence capabilities and navigate the challenges and tensions in the current geopolitical landscape.

Justyna Gotkowska

Deputy Director at the Polish Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)

The *Zeitenwende* - bearing a promise of a decisive change in the German security policy - has so far not been fulfilled. Even if more money has been granted to the Bundeswehr in the form of the modernisation fund worth 100 billion euro, only a fraction of this has been spent so far. According to the NATO defence pledge, Germany still has to meet its obligation to spend at least 2% of its GDP on defence in 2024. **The German MoD needs to present and implement long-awaited reforms to the structure of the Bundeswehr and of the ministry itself, as well as to the procurement policy** - if Berlin wants to have at its disposal a military force that can contribute to collective defence in a meaningful way. While enhancing the armed forces' readiness, Germany should be **more willing to ramp up its military presence, especially in the Baltic states, in the coming years**. All this requires efforts to enhance arms production in Germany to fulfil the needs of the Bundeswehr, European and Ukrainian armed forces. In the years to come, sustainable arms deliveries to Ukraine will be needed if the country is to sustain its war effort, win the war and deter any other Russian aggression in the future. **Berlin has to sustain and increase its military support to Kyiv in terms of ammunition and military equipment beyond what has been sent and promised so far**. All in all, a lot of work ahead of the new German defence minister.

CONCLUSION

Since Chancellor Olaf Scholz's declaration, Germany's commitment to a Zeitenwende in defence has encountered significant challenges and obstacles. While there have been notable policy reversals and commitments, progress has been slow and hindered by pre-existing constraints and ineffective strategies. The gaps in military capabilities, including severe deficiencies in equipment and outdated technologies, highlight the urgent need for modernisation and increased defence spending.

Structural factors, such as limitations imposed by the debt brake and challenges in public procurement, further complicate this process. Germany's historical discomfort with military power and commitment to financial stability pose significant hurdles in reforming the defence sector. Overcoming these obstacles requires public dialogue, leadership commitment, and balancing historical sensitivities with national security interests.

Despite the challenges, the German government has demonstrated a commitment to progress, with measures to strengthen defence capabilities and support Ukraine. However, while it has increased deliveries for Ukraine, the results failed to materialise nationally, and funds have yet to reach their destinations.

The slow progress has frustrated Germany's allies because of what they perceive as a lack of urgency. Decisive action, expedited procurement procedures, and proactive measures are needed to fulfil Germany's obligations and effectively navigate the current geopolitical landscape.

To fulfil the promise of a Zeitenwende, Germany must meet its defence spending targets, implement long-awaited reforms to the Bundeswehr and the Ministry of Defence, and enhance its presence in vulnerable regions along with its NATO allies. The new German Defence Minister faces significant challenges, requiring efforts to enhance arms production and ensure a well-equipped and capable military force.

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