



Germany's *Zeitenwende* in foreign and security policy: Domestic developments and alliance dynamics after one year

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Introduction

Days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, German Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a *Zeitenwende*, a historical turning point to which Germany would respond by reforming its foreign and security policies. In a speech in the Federal Parliament (Bundestag) on 27 February 2022, Chancellor Scholz listed five points for the reform agenda: supporting Ukraine (also militarily), sanctioning Russia, increased German contribution to NATO's eastern flank, investment in more capable armed forces, and decoupling from Russian energy. The third point included a €100 billion special investment fund, so-called *Sondervermögen*, that would be used to boost Germany's military capabilities and especially alleviate the most urgent material shortcomings of the armed forces. Given that Germany had been considered a

laggard in European defence due to its restrictive approach on military capability – partly because of the historical legacy of guilt for World War II and partly a condition of Germany's reunification after the Cold War – the announcement of a turning point raised expectations in Euro-Atlantic defence circles.

How has Germany lived up to its promises a little over one year after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine? This policy brief takes stock of developments in German defence policy since Scholz held his *Zeitenwende* speech, with a particular focus on three aspects: the status for the military operationalization of *Zeitenwende*, the implications for NATO, and the consequences that *Zeitenwende* has for Norwegian security and defence policy.

The military *Zeitenwende* and implications for NATO

A vital part of the “military *Zeitenwende*” is the planned rearmament and force development that would enable Germany to potentially assume a leadership role, or at least in the short term to live up to existing NATO commitments, in the defence of Europe.

The business plan for the Bundeswehr Special Fund approved by the Bundestag allocated €33.4 billion to air force procurements, €16.6 billion to land and €8.8 billion to maritime as well as €20.8 billion for procurement within command capability and digitalization. These figures and the planned investments have however since changed, partly due to the significant cost of raising capital for the fund. According to a ministerial budgeter the expected interest rate costs over the years could amount to €13 billion and depending on the management of the fund this would leave €87 billion in capital actually available for investments. On top of this, part of the purchasing power of the fund is eaten up by inflation.

The operationalization of the fund has in part been implemented by the establishment of project groups responsible for different portfolios. It has also been facilitated through introduction of new legislation on defence procurement. In June 2022, the Bundestag and Bundesrat passed the Acceleration Act for Procurement Measures for the Federal Armed Forces. This legislation enables the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Bundeswehr to engage in acquisitions and procurement with fewer legal constraints than previously for a limited time period.

Several major defence acquisitions and procurement projects planned to draw from the special fund have been announced and to varying extents formalised. The investment-approach is heavily tilted towards acquisitions of existing systems and attachment or upscaling of ongoing multilateral procurement processes. This indicates a relative degree of haste in the rearmament of the Bundeswehr. Criticism has however been levied against the political leadership and the German procurement agency for being overly rigid, too bureaucratic and slow, and thus far nothing much has changed in practice, despite the legislative changes to that effect.

The annual report of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the armed forces concluded that instead of improvement, the material situation has become more dire, as Germany has delivered significant amounts of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine but has not been able to replenish stocks quickly enough. The new Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, who replaced Christine Lambrecht after her resignation in January 2023, has taken a more proactive approach than his predecessor and intends to speed up investment processes. Pistorius is expected to announce reform plans for not only the armed forces but also the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in May 2023. Germany’s ability to keep up support for Ukraine and to fulfil its NATO obligations directly hinges on the internal reform process.

Acquisitions and Procurement

Among the most crucial acquisitions related to the military *Zeitenwende* is the €8.3 billion purchase of 35 F-35 fighter aircraft approved by the Bundestag in December 2022. The F-35 is planned to replace the ageing fleet of Tornado aircrafts as the delivery platform for nuclear munitions stored in Germany under the nuclear sharing scheme. It is therefore a vital component for the modernization of the technological foundation for NATO nuclear deterrence and defence.

The implications of the F-35 acquisition are significant. It signals resolute commitment to the transatlantic relationship and is crucial for NATO’s nuclear deterrence and defence posture. By purchasing the F-35’s, Germany signals renewed commitment to nuclear sharing, more important now than it has ever been since the Cold War. The practice of nuclear sharing has been controversial in Germany for years and in the previous election campaign the Greens and some SPD-politicians called for ending the forward stationing of nuclear munitions on German soil. The continuation of the practice was however agreed in the Coalition Deal adopted by the parties comprising the current Scholz government in November 2021.

Another pivotal investment drawing from the special fund is the upscaling of the German order for Boeing P-8 Maritime surveillance aircraft, going from 5 to 12 units. This is a substantial increase that will make the German navy capable of wide-ranging surveillance of maritime areas in the Baltic Sea and elsewhere. The initial order of 5 aircraft is set to be delivered to the Bundeswehr from 2024 onwards and the German government is currently in negotiations with Boeing for the terms of the increased order. Some uncertainty exists regarding the transaction and the final number of aircrafts to be delivered. This will be a key upcoming development for assessing the trajectory of the military *Zeitenwende*.

A large portion of the capital allocated to the German Army from the special fund is planned to be invested in armoured vehicles. Among the announced investments are new short-range mortar carriers. For the mortar carriers the German MoD opted to join the ongoing procurement process of the Common Armoured Vehicle System (CAVS) led by Finland and manufacturer Patria, aiming to purchase the self-propelled mortar version of the system. This option is purported to make the capability available to the Army faster than a new German-led procurement process would. The prioritisation of armoured vehicles has been reported to partly be a consequence of the Army’s share of the Bundeswehr Special Fund not being sufficient to cover all its needs. This illustrates the massive need for investment, if the modernization of the Bundeswehr is to make it “the best equipped force in Europe” as Chancellor Scholz stated as an intention in September 2022.

New approach to Military Assistance

Another crucial and thus far the most advanced compo-

ment of the military *Zeitenwende* is the development in Germany's approach to military assistance illustrated by extensive and impactful arms support to Ukraine. Although a contentious issue among German policymakers and divisive in public opinion polls, the decision to grant re-export approval and transfer of initially 14, later increased to 18, Leopard 2 battle tanks to Ukraine in February 2023 indicates a significant shift. In addition, Germany has pledged together with Denmark and the Netherlands over 100 older Leopard 1 tanks to be transferred to Ukraine, enough to supply three mechanised battalions.

Germany is also making efforts to increase its ability to provide Ukraine with ammunition. At a Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting on the 14th of February 2023, defence minister Boris Pistorius announced that German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall would manufacture 300.000 rounds of ammunition for the Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns Germany have supplied Ukraine. Rheinmetall shortly after announced that the German MoD had placed an order for 150,000 rounds of armour-piercing discarding sabot - tracer (APDS-T) and high-explosive incendiary - tracer (HEI-T) ammunition. This order is valued at several hundred million Euros. German military assistance to Ukraine has increased steadily throughout the ongoing war. Despite this, a significant amount of criticism has been directed at the Scholz government for acting too hesitantly and slowly, particularly with regards to the decision to transfer Leopard battle tanks. The development in the German approach to military assistance could however be viewed as profound, particularly considering modern German history and its persistent tradition of prioritising diplomacy and dialogue in its foreign relations, and its high threshold for considering the use of armed force.

New NATO Force Model

The planned German force contributions to the new NATO Force Model (NFM) could be considered a key factor for evaluating the potency of the military *Zeitenwende*. The MoD has announced that by 2025 they will contribute 30.000 personnel and a combination of aircrafts and vessels totalling 85, mobilizable in 30 days. Germany was the first NATO-member to make such a pledge, raising the politico-military importance of the NFM. The ability of Germany to deliver on this lofty announcement is a challenge given recruitment difficulties in the Bundeswehr, the complexity of mobilising forces quickly and the number of resources required. The fact that the new military equipment Germany acquires through the Special Fund necessitates increased regular defence budgets for maintenance and personnel is also a factor. How Germany manages to implement the planned force development will be a test to the sustainability of Germany's commitment and a key issue to follow up in the near future.

Consequences for Norwegian security and defence policy

The Norwegian government has taken notice of the

importance of, and possibilities inherent in, Germany's ambitions for a new role in European security. As such there is political will in Norway to capitalise on the *Zeitenwende* to increase cooperation. These opportunities pertain both to industrial and operational cooperation. There are tangible areas of cooperation ongoing or on the horizon in protection of maritime energy infrastructure in Norwegian waters, cooperation in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Lithuania where Germany acts as lead nation, cooperation with the German-Netherlands Corps (1GNC), joint procurement of TKMS 212CD submarines, likely German purchase of Naval Strike Missiles (NSM) produced by the Norwegian company Kongsberg Defence & Aerospace, and Norwegian acquisition of 54 German-made Leopard 2 tanks. There is also a Norway-led joint long-term development project on second generation naval missiles – called Future NSM – on the horizon with planned deliveries from 2035. In sum, and as the Norwegian Defence Minister Bjørn Arild Gram noted in his speech at the Berlin Security Conference in December 2022, German-Norwegian defence relations could evolve into a strategic partnership.

In this context, the increased German capacity for establishing and maintaining situational awareness in maritime areas provided by the new fleet of P-8s makes the acquisition particularly relevant for Norwegian-German defence cooperation. Chancellor Scholz has stated that Germany intends to assist Norway in securing its petroleum installations and maritime infrastructure, potentially including the maintaining of situational awareness in the Northern waters. The fact that Norway operates its own fleet of P-8s could yield close to seamless interoperability for sustained multilateral surveillance operations. In addition, the late 2022-proposal of a NATO surveillance centre for subsea infrastructure presented jointly by Norway and Germany illustrates the emphasis both countries place on this endeavour.

The joint Norwegian-German procurement of the TKMS 212CD submarine is also highly significant for increased defence integration between the two countries. The cooperation agreement for this project was signed in June 2021 and entails full-lifecycle cooperation for the vessels. The initial procurement plan for the submarines was to produce four units for the Norwegian navy and two for the German to be delivered from 2029 and onwards. The German MoD have decided to upscale their order and have previously stated an intention to draw from the special fund for this venture. There are also indications that Germany could decide to scale up their order even further based on a naval development plan that was published by the Bundeswehr but quickly removed in March 2023. If materialised, this would result in an improved German ability to conduct subsurface-warfare and maritime reconnaissance.

The submarines will be equipped with highly sophisticated stealth technology and designed for long-endurance missions, making them well-suited for operations in the Northern waters. The close cooperation

between Norway and Germany in all phases of the procurement combined with the TKMS 212CD's properties is significant for the future defence of Norway and NATO's Northern flank. The combination of the German stated intent to support Norway in the maritime domain and the increase in subsurface-capacity and maritime surveillance-capacity ensured by the TKMS 212CDs and P-8s could provide great opportunities for sustained multilateral operations in the future. This potential cooperation will be contingent on the endurance of the German will to contribute to the defence of its allies, and optimization of its bureaucratic procedures.

Conclusion

Germany's *Zeitenwende* will have – and has already had – consequences for European security. However, questions remain about the long-term sustainability of Germany's change of course, as well as about the reform speed. The replacement of Christine Lambrecht by Boris Pistorius as Defence Minister is one significant step towards accelerated pace. But the structural challenges of reforming the Bundeswehr are enormous and will take time. Germany's bureaucracy is still working in peacetime tempo, which indicates that the sense of urgency is still only partially felt.

There are signs that Germany seriously intends to increase its contribution to European security, as its pledges to NATO's eFP and NFM and the joint initiatives with Norway indicate. However, most of the changes implemented and projects initiated so far are reactions to increased threats to either Allied interests that involve Germany (Eastern flank, where Germany has NATO

commitments) or to its direct national interests (Norway became Germany's main supplier of natural gas after decoupling from Russia). But a sustainable *Zeitenwende* requires a more profound reform plan. At the moment, it is still unclear what the relation of the Bundeswehr's two main international tasks – territorial national and collective defence, and crisis management – will be, going forward. Currently, the significant changes in European security have spurred a stronger emphasis on the former but a clear definition is expected to be included in the new, first-ever National Security Strategy, the publication which has been postponed to an undefined date. In order to succeed, the reform of the armed forces and the massive procurement plans need guidance in the form of a clear threat and task definition.

With NATO's "new old" emphasis on territorial defence in Europe, Germany's role is further accentuated as a crucial puzzle piece in the centre of Europe. Germany is a particularly relevant ally in terms of defending the eastern flank and could ideally also adopt a more active role in the Baltic and North Sea security architecture. Germany has shown a particular interest in working together with Norway on maritime issues, as it is in Germany's vital self-interest to secure its energy supply from Norway against potential Russian interference. However, should the situation become less urgent due to Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine or Germany's own efforts to diversify the energy portfolio, Germany's commitment could slacken again. Therefore, it is important for Norway to use the current momentum for joint projects given that political will is strong on both sides.

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