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Zeitenwende: German Foreign Policy Change in the Wake of Russia's War Against Ukraine

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Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine has severely damaged the European security architecture. This article examines the consequences of this rupture for German foreign and security policy. Just a few months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Germany saw the transition to an unprecedented three-party coalition government of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals. In a special address to the Bundestag three days after the invasion, Chancellor Olaf Scholz described Russia's war initiation as a historical *Zeitenwende* ("watershed") that called into question long-held beliefs about European security. In the wake of this, Scholz proclaimed far-reaching changes, including the announcement that military expenditure would be drastically increased, additional military capabilities would be procured, and new deployments would be committed to NATO's eastern flank. This article argues that the *Zeitenwende* amounts to an international orientation change in German foreign and security policy. Apart from identifying areas of significant change, the article also documents political contestation over the *Zeitenwende*'s nature and extent as well as gaps between proclaimed changes and actual implementation.

Keywords

arms exports; defense procurement; foreign policy change; international security; party politics; political contestation; security policy

1. Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has severely damaged the European security architecture. The Russian invasion constituted a brazen violation of the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, and the Charter of Paris, not to mention numerous other norm violations, while challenging the authority of international institutions at large

(OSCE PA, 2023, p. 34; UN, 2022). The legal justifications put forth by the Russian leadership all failed to meet the criteria of the *jus ad bellum* and, specifically, legal exceptions to the general prohibition on the use of force (Green et al., 2022; Heller, 2022). Moreover, Russian forces have evidently been violating the *jus in bello* with disproportionate uses of force and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, residential buildings, and other targets prohibited by international humanitarian law (OSCE, 2022).

This article examines the consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine for German foreign and security policy. Just a few months before the attack, Germany saw a government transition from a grand coalition of Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) under Angela Merkel to a new government led by Olaf Scholz, heading an unprecedented three-party *Ampel* ("traffic-light") coalition of SPD, Greens, and Liberals (FDP), inaugurated in December 2021. To the surprise of many observers, Russia's attack on Ukraine prompted Chancellor Scholz to proclaim far-reaching changes in German foreign and security policy. He described Russia's war initiation as a historical *Zeitenwende* ("watershed") that called into question long-held beliefs about German and European security.

Key points in Scholz's special address to the Bundestag, on February 27, 2022, entailed the announcement that Germany would drastically increase its military expenditure including a one-time surplus budget of €100 billion (which required a constitutional change) and permanent increases in the defense budget, so that "more than 2%" of GDP would be spent "year by year" (Bundestag, 2022a, p. 1350). Moreover, Scholz declared that Germany would acquire additional military capabilities such as F-35A fighter jets to further participate in NATO's nuclear sharing and armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), like the Israeli Heron drone, both of which had long been the subject of controversial debates among political actors in Berlin, especially among Social Democrats (e.g., SPD, 2021). Scholz also emphasized, in February 2022, that his government would initiate new European arms projects on battle tanks and fighter jets, in cooperation with France and other partners, and that Germany would expand its military deployments on NATO's eastern flank.

The term *Zeitenwende* introduced by Scholz in his Bundestag address and reiterated in a *Foreign Affairs* article (Scholz, 2023a) has become a shorthand for foreign policy change even though its original meaning was to describe the implications of Russia's war against Ukraine for international politics. As Scholz himself admitted in an article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, "ascertaining a watershed moment is not in itself the same as setting an agenda" (Scholz, 2023b, translation by BKAmt). That said, the *Zeitenwende* has been intensely discussed in German politics and political commentary ever since. Numerous publications have observed and analyzed the *Zeitenwende* and the ensuing changes in German foreign policy (e.g., Blumenau, 2022; Bunde, 2022; David-Wilp & Kleine-Brockhoff, 2022; Driedger, 2022; Mader & Schoen, 2023; Matlé, 2023; Riemann & Löfflmann, 2023; Tallis, 2023).

While there is no consensus on how to assess these developments, it appears that early observers were more enthusiastic about the proclaimed changes in German foreign policy than later evaluations. For instance, following on the heels of Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, David-Wilp and Kleine-Brockhoff (2022, p. 1) opined that Germany "has undergone a dramatic transformation, shedding its reluctant and dovish foreign policy and committing itself to drastically increase defense spending." Blumenau (2022, p. 1913, original emphasis) concluded that "*Zeitenwende* represented a clear break with convention," as seen in the delivery of heavy weapons and the sweeping increase in military expenditure. In a similar vein, Bunde (2022, p. 2) argued that "the Russian invasion will likely trigger a more far-reaching overhaul of German foreign policy beliefs," but he

also noted debates among German elites about "whether change already goes too far," which foreshadowed obstacles to the implementation of further changes.

As time passed and the war in Ukraine continued, the evaluations of Scholz's pronounced foreign policy changes have become more critical. In stark contrast to her own prior assessment, David-Wilp (2023, p. 4) concluded, in April, that "in the 14 months since Scholz spoke, it is apparent that the effort has come up short." And Karnitschnig (2023) simply stated that "the best way to describe Scholz's much-ballyhooed slogan is with a blunt Americanism: bullshit." In a more nuanced evaluation, Tallis (2023) argued that the *Zeitenwende* does not constitute a "fundamental change" but "a policy adjustment in some areas…and a course correction in others." By contrast, Matlé (2023, p. 33) reasoned that "Germany has fundamentally changed its security, defence, and energy policies in reaction to Russia's renewed and fully-fledged war of aggression against Ukraine." Nonetheless, Matlé (2023, p. 34) came to an overall negative assessment because Germany's "self-asserted aspirations do not match its deeds." Turning to potential reasons for the observed inertia, Masala (2023, p. 8) contended that the German defense establishment and bureaucracy acted as one would expect during peacetime but not with a war in close vicinity. Finally, some analysts have examined whether the *Zeitenwende* had an impact on policy attitudes toward foreign and security defense policy. Based on panel data analyses before and after the Russian invasion, Mader and Schoen (2023, p. 542) identified "no *Zeitenwende* at the level of German public opinion (yet)." Nonetheless, their study documented substantive growth in public support for increased military spending (Mader & Schoen, 2023, p. 536).

In this article, I argue that the *Zeitenwende* not only marks a watershed moment in international politics but also an "international orientation change" in German foreign policy (Hermann, 1990). This resonates with one of the aims of this thematic issue, namely to comparatively examine foreign policy change in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine (see Baciu et al., 2024; Böller & Wenzelburger, 2024; among others). The observed foreign policy change sets the *Zeitenwende* apart from the post-Cold War era, throughout which Germany "adjusted its position and reinterpreted its role in international affairs" (Mello, 2021, p. 175), yet these adjustments were not interpreted as instances of international orientation change (on the debate about German foreign policy throughout the 1990s see Peters, 2001). I apply the criteria of Hermann's (1990) classic conceptual framework of foreign policy change to show that, in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*, there have been modifications in Germany's international role, program and goal changes in the country's foreign policy, and policy redirection in many issue areas (for comparative assessments using similar criteria, see the contributions in Joly & Haesebrouck, 2021). In a short timespan since February 2022, the German government has made a range of far-reaching decisions in security and defense, including several policy reversals and modifications of its own role conception, but the *Zeitenwende* also caused an overhaul of the country's energy and trade policies and international cooperation at large, with further implications for other policy domains.

To substantiate my argument, I analyze recent German foreign and security policy, applying Hermann's (1990) conceptual framework. While much has been written about the *Zeitenwende*, this article makes a twofold contribution. First, it establishes a connection between the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature on foreign policy change and contemporary analyses of German foreign policy. Second, this article draws on a broader empirical basis as opposed to analyses that were conducted in the immediate aftermath of Scholz's Bundestag address. Hence, this allows for re-assessments of previous claims in light of new empirical evidence. That said, one caveat remains, namely that the processes of change that were initiated in the wake of the *Zeitenwende* are by no means complete and uncontested, which invites future research.

The remainder of this article has five parts: The next section provides a conceptualization of foreign policy change together with criteria to assess whether the *Zeitenwende* has led to an international orientation change in German foreign policy. This is followed by sections on the respective criteria, involving role change, program and goal change, and changes across policy domains. A concluding section draws together the findings, situates them in the literature, and provides a brief outlook.

2. Conceptualizing Foreign Policy Change to Assess the *Zeitenwende*

For observers of German foreign policy, the government's response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine raises the question of whether the changes in the wake of the *Zeitenwende* amount to a foreign policy reorientation or whether these should rather be seen as adaptation amidst broad contours of foreign policy continuity. Since reunification, over the past three decades, Germany has continuously adjusted its foreign policy stance (Brummer & Kießling, 2019; Mello, 2021; Peters, 2001). In the late 1990s, the first red-green government had to reconcile Germany's traditional role as a "civilian power" with the realities of humanitarian crises in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere (Harnisch & Maull, 2001; Maull, 1990). Among others, this led to foreign policy "goal change" (Hermann, 1990), where Germany redefined the role of its armed forces to allow for active participation in multinational operations, which also required clarification of the constitutional requirements and the role of parliament in authorizing military missions (Wagner, 2017). The adjustments and adaptations since the 1990s have been accompanied by studies that sought to explore whether Germany's foreign policy role as a civilian power had changed through the country's involvement in military interventions with increasingly more "robust" mandates (e.g., Böller, 2022; Gaskarth & Oppermann, 2019; Geis, 2013; Hellmann, 1996; Malici, 2006; Mello, 2019; Rathbun, 2006; Stengel, 2020).

According to a review of German foreign policy between 1990 and 2020 (Mello, 2021, pp. 174–175), Germany's policy adjustments never amounted to an "international orientation change," which is understood as the most extensive type of foreign policy change in Hermann's (1990) classic conceptual framework that further includes "adjustment change," "program change," and "goal change" as lesser forms of foreign policy change (see also Joly & Haesebrouck, 2021). As Hermann (1990, pp. 5–6, emphasis added) defined it, international orientation change involves:

> The redirection of the actor's entire orientation toward world affairs. In contrast to lesser forms of change that concern the actor's approach to a single issue or specific set of other actors, orientation change involves a basic shift in the actor's international *role* and *activities*. Not one policy but *many* are more or less simultaneously changed.

Based on Hermann's (1990) definition, *international orientation change* thus requires the presence of three indicators: modifications in an actor's international role, changes in an actor's international activities involving program and/or goal changes, and foreign policy redirection in many issue areas. The first criterion (role change) is demanding to satisfy empirically, but it can find expression in the redefinition of an actor's role conception (Breuning, 2023; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016). *Roles* are commonly defined as "social positions" that are founded on "ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group" (Harnisch, 2011, p. 8). Hence, to fulfill this criterion, changes in an actor's self-conception or the expectations of others would have to be identified (on the latter, see, for example, Wehner, 2015), for instance, through their expression in security doctrines, policies, or political declarations. The second

criterion, *activities*, entails the output dimension, which boils down to the means of foreign policy and the material basis on which foreign policy is conducted. This can find expression either in changes regarding the "methods or means by which the goal or problem is addressed" or it may comprise the entire replacement of a foreign policy goal (Hermann, 1990, p. 5). Finally, the third criterion is relatively straightforward, as it requires substantive changes not just on a single foreign policy issue but in numerous policy domains. With this conceptualization of international orientation change in place, the following sections turn to German foreign policy in the wake of the *Zeitenwende*, examining (a) changing role conceptions, (b) changes in the means and goals of foreign policy, and (c) changes across policy domains.

3. Role Change: Germany as Guarantor of European Security?

The *Zeitenwende* provided evidence of changes in Germany's national role conception, as articulated in speeches by cabinet members and in government documents of the traffic-light coalition. This entails the *self-conception* of Germany's foreign policy role, shared among many political decision-makers and elites, as well as the role expectations of relevant others, foremost Germany's European and Atlantic allies and partners. A comprehensive analysis of the latter is beyond the scope of this article; hence I will focus on four, non-exhaustive examples to illustrate modifications in the self-conception of Germany's national role.

The first example is Scholz's *Foreign Affairs* article, published in January 2023, where he rang the familiar theme but elevated it to a global level: "the world is facing a *Zeitenwende*: an epochal tectonic shift" marked by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which has "put an end to an era" (Scholz, 2023a, p. 22, original emphasis). While one may rightfully question whether this notion is shared equally across the globe (cf. Jagtiani & Wellek, 2022), Scholz's article is instructive in how it (re)conceptualizes Germany's foreign policy role, also in relation to its allies:

> For its part, Germany is doing everything it can to defend and foster an international order based on the principles of the UN Charter. Its democracy, security, and prosperity depend on binding power to common rules. That is why *Germans are intent on becoming the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be*, a bridge builder within the European Union and an advocate for multilateral solutions to global problems. This is the only way for Germany to successfully navigate the geopolitical rifts of our time. (Scholz, 2023a, p. 22, emphasis added)

This quote expresses a role conception that is undeniably rooted in Germany's familiar role of socialization as a civilian power, as evident in the underlining of multilateralism, the UN Charter, democracy, and an international order with common rules (Harnisch & Maull, 2001; Maull, 1990). However, the phrase *guarantor of European security* clearly modifies the civilian power role conception by introducing a notion of hard security, and by implication, military power and conventional deterrence. The emphasis on maintaining order in the international system resonates with the tradition of thought of Germany as a "reluctant hegemon" that adopts a leadership role and exercises power, but only through multilateral frameworks (Bulmer & Paterson, 2013; Gaskarth & Oppermann, 2019).

The second example ties in with the previous one in its emphasis on military leadership. It is from a speech by then-Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht in September 2022, on the occasion of the forthcoming National Security Strategy (NSS; which was eventually published in June 2023, see example four below). In a

much-quoted passage that directly refers to Germany's foreign policy self-conception, Lambrecht (2022, BMVg translation, added emphasis) explained that Germany ought to be considered a leading power, also in military terms:

> It has become clear by now that at its heart, this debate is about *how Germany understands its role as a nation*, as a neighbor, as a democracy, as an ally.…Germany's size, its geographic location, its economic power, in short: its heft *makes it a leading power* whether we want to or not. And that *includes the military domain*.

The third example are the *Guidelines for Feminist Foreign Policy* (henceforth referred to as *Guidelines*), published in March 2023, by Annalena Baerbock's Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt, 2023). When the coalition government was inaugurated in 2021, this raised expectations of new directions in German foreign policy. Two of the coalition parties had been in opposition for a considerable time. The Greens had not been in government since 2005, whereas the FDP had been part of Merkel's second cabinet, until 2013. The Greens, especially, had been vocal about their "value-based" foreign policy agenda, which included a decidedly feminist approach to foreign policy (Aggestam & True, 2020; Henshaw, 2023), and a more assertive position vis-à-vis human rights violations and authoritarian regimes like China and Russia, as articulated, among others, in the party's election manifesto (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2021). In their coalition agreement, the parties stressed that their foreign policy would be "feminist" and "value-based" in multilateral cooperation and develop a "strategic solidarity" with democratically governed partner states, also in the context of "systemic competition" with authoritarian regimes (SPD et al., 2021, p. 113). With the publication of its *Guidelines*, Baerbock's foreign office took a step in that direction, underscoring that "in the coalition agreement, we committed to feminist foreign policy [FFP]," which "centres gender equity and human security more strongly in foreign policy activities. This makes it an essential component of values-led foreign policy" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2023, p. 3, 13). Through this policy initiative, Germany has joined about a dozen countries that expressly pursue FFP (UN Women, 2022). Undoubtedly, this has modified the country's national role conception, because six guidelines have a direct effect on foreign policy activities. The extent to which FFP remains contested became visible in a heated exchange between Baerbock and CDU leader Friedrich Merz, in which Baerbock strongly underlined the importance of a feminist perspective on security policy, also in light of the current war in Ukraine (Bundestag, 2022b, p. 1968).

Finally, the fourth example is the NSS, published in June 2023, under the banner of "integrated security" (Bundesregierung, 2023d). The 76-page document was presented at a press conference with the chancellor and the ministers of defense, foreign affairs, interior, and finance—a novum in German politics, which underlined the significance but also the political contestation surrounding the doctrine. In their coalition agreement, the SPD, Greens, and FDP had announced that a "comprehensive" national security strategy would be published "within the first year" of the new government (SPD et al., 2021, p. 114). Yet, the publication date had been postponed repeatedly, apparently because the parties could not agree on its contents (Lamby, 2023). Among others, while there seemed to have been an agreement about the creation of a national security council, similar to the National Security Council in the US, it was disputed where this institution was supposed to sit in the organizational hierarchy of the government. Both the chancellery and the foreign office sought to claim it for themselves and, eventually, the idea was buried (von Hein, 2023). Substantively, the NSS reflects the changed European security architecture. There is a clear emphasis on territorial defense and Russia is labeled "the biggest threat" to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area,

while China is simultaneously described as a "partner," "competitor," and "rival" (Bundesregierung, 2023d, p. 12). Concerning defense spending (see also the next section), the NSS entails the curious formulation that NATO's 2% goal shall be reached "also through the surplus budget…on average over several years" (Bundesregierung, 2023d, p. 33). Hence, the commitment is weakened because it's unclear over which period the government seeks to attain the defense spending goal and it is also a step back from Scholz's earlier announcements, where the surplus budget was supposed to add to an already increased regular budget.

The four examples illustrate modifications in the self-conception of Germany's international role, as defined by government actors. The notions of Germany as a "guarantor of European security" and "military power" evidently shift the country's understanding of its role towards being a (reluctant) European hegemon that exercises power to maintain international order. Nonetheless, this changed role conception remains firmly embedded in multilateral frameworks, foremost the EU and NATO, which continue to be essential for Germany's self-understanding. The adoption of a FFP has added another layer to existing normative frameworks, which also feature prominently in the new national security strategy. That said, these examples should neither imply that the observations were entirely novel nor that the expressed role conceptions were uncontested politically. Arguably, the idea that Germany ought to take on more international responsibility has a long pedigree (e.g., Schoeller, 2023). Politicians have repeatedly argued in favor of this. Yet it appears that the *Zeitenwende* has ushered in a qualitative change in political rhetoric. Concerning political contestation, the picture becomes more fine-grained if one looks at party-political differences and coalition dynamics. Clearly, the coalition parties are not entirely on the same line when it comes to Germany's envisaged role conception, as evident in the conflict over the NSS. Moreover, we know from research that party-political differences also appear in foreign policy (Haesebrouck & Mello, 2020; Hofmann, 2021; Wagner et al., 2018).

4. Program and Goal Change: Security and Defense Policy Reorientation

Without a doubt, the most striking modifications in the wake of the *Zeitenwende* were program and goal changes. This entailed the creation of a surplus defense budget of €100 billion, major increases in the regular defense budget, and extensive arms deliveries to support Ukraine, including heavy weaponry like howitzers and battle tanks. Finally, Germany also substantially bolstered its military commitment to NATO's eastern flank, announcing a permanent deployment of 4,000 soldiers to Lithuania. I address these in turn.

Announced in Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech (Bundestag, 2022a), the surplus budget (*Sondervermögen*) of €100 billion required a constitutional amendment, introducing a new clause into the *Grundgesetz* (Art. 87a) that enabled a one-time additional debt to strengthen alliance and defense capabilities. This was necessary to circumvent the constitutional "debt brake" (*Schuldenbremse*) that was enacted in the Constitution in 2009. The military *Sondervermögen* was unprecedented in the history of the Federal Republic and qualifies as a "program change," according to Hermann's (1990) conceptual framework. The constitutional change was affirmed on June 3, 2022, with subsequent ratification from the second chamber of parliament (Bundestag, 2022c). The parliamentary approval had been preceded by intense debates about how to spend the *Sondervermögen* planned for the *Bundeswehr*. Some SPD and Green MPs had suggested that it should also be used to acquire other capabilities, such as for cyber defense and the protection of critical infrastructure. Meanwhile, the conservative opposition had declared that it would only agree to the required constitutional

change for the additional budget if the money would be solely devoted to the core tasks of the armed forces. Eventually, an agreement was reached, so that cyber defense and other requests would be financed from the regular budget, while the surplus budget would be dedicated to core defense capabilities ("Einigung auf Sondervermögen," 2022).

Even though the formal hurdles of a constitutional change had been passed to make way for the surplus budget, this was not matched at the implementation stage. Newspapers reported that despite substantial military equipment given to Ukraine since the invasion, the defense ministry had neither ordered replacement ammunition nor much-needed military hardware ("Bundeswehr bestellt Ukraine-Material," 2023). While the announcement was made in February 2022, it was not before December 2022 that the first procurement agreements were submitted to the parliamentary budget committee, which must approve defense spending above €25 million. On another note, in July 2022, the Bundestag passed into law a defense ministry initiative, then still under the leadership of Lambrecht, to speed up procurement for the armed forces. In April 2023, the ministry reported that €32 billion of the surplus budget had been dedicated to new procurement projects, including the acquisition of the F-35A fighter jet, on which a contract had been signed in December 2022 (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2023a, p. 49).

The second area concerns the regular defense budget, where Scholz had pronounced major increases to permanently lift defense spending so that NATO's stated goal of 2% of GDP would be met or even surpassed (Bundestag, 2022a, p. 1353). Since the late 1990s, Germany's defense spending has continuously wavered around 1.2% of GDP (Mello, 2021, p. 167). At first, it appeared that the government aimed to spend the surplus budget and, on top of that, would increase its yearly defense expenditures. However, it soon became apparent that the surplus budget was meant to get closer to the 2% goal and the regular budget would not see further increases (Matlé, 2023). Figure 1 shows Germany's relative defense spending as a share of GDP, compared to average NATO and EU spending, based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI; 2023) data for the years 1990–2022. It is evident that Germany's expenditures, despite increases in recent years, currently hover around 1.5% and thus far from the 2% goal, which was even further strengthened at NATO's Vilnius summit in July 2023, where member states pledged to "invest at least 2%" of GDP on defense (NATO, 2023). Given current financial planning, the 2% goal could be reached temporarily for 2024, and possibly for another two years, but only if the surplus budget and defense-related expenses from other ministries are added to the regular defense budget for calculation purposes. In 2027, once large parts of the surplus budget have been spent, there would be a gap of €25 billion towards the 2% goal, and this would grow further in the ensuing years (Dorn & Schlepper, 2023, p. 26).

The third area concerns arms deliveries to Ukraine. Here, the government has made a complete policy turnabout in the weeks and months after the Russian invasion, departing from Germany's longtime dictum to never send weapons into conflict zones. Arguably, this dictum was never as rigid as it was sometimes made to be (also by government officials), because there are several cases where Germany did indeed export weapons to countries that were involved in armed conflict. Moreover, the political guidelines on weapons exports include exceptions for cases of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. That said, it was remarkable and unprecedented how Germany, despite its traditional military reluctance, became one of the strongest international supporters of Ukraine, in terms of total commitments but also in military terms. Table 1 shows this, based on commitment data from the Ukraine Support Tracker through July 31, 2023 (Trebesch et al., 2023). Accordingly, Germany follows the US and EU in total bilateral commitments, but its

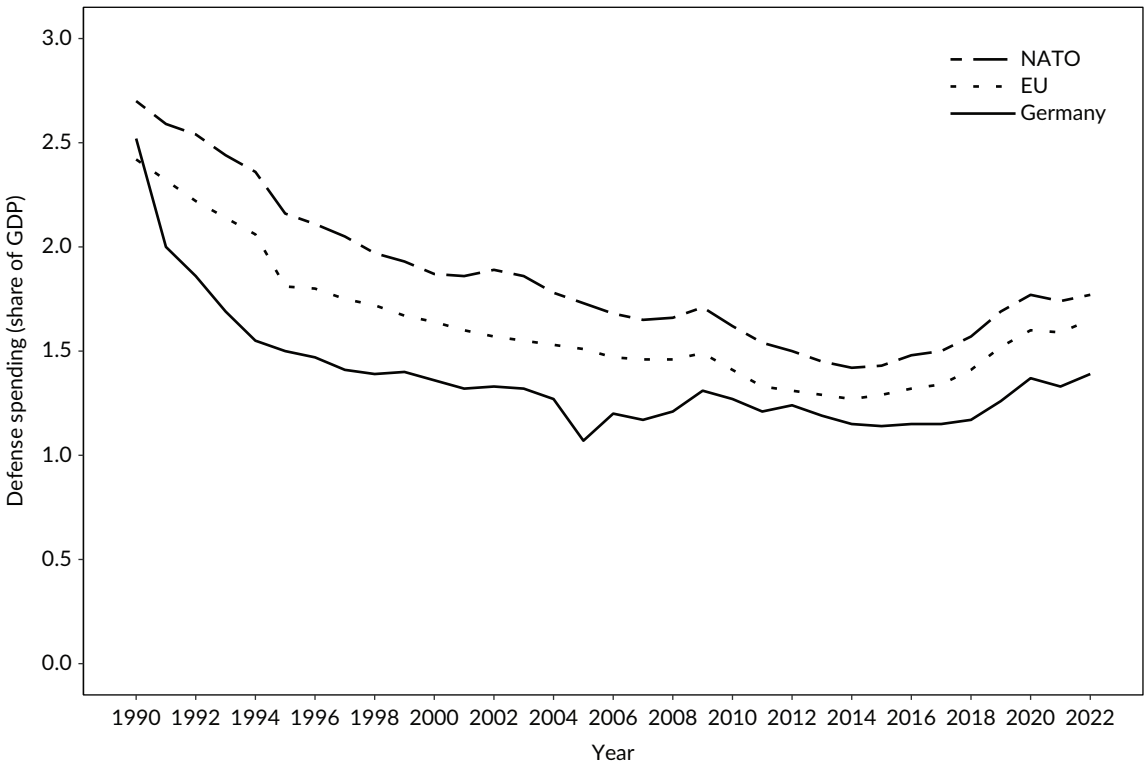

Figure 1. Germany's annual proportional defense spending, as share of GDP, compared to average NATO and EU spending (1990–2022). Source: SIPRI (2023), own illustration.

relative share exceeds the US (0.54% of GDP, as opposed to 0.33%). In military terms, Germany is the second largest contributor after the US, with all other European countries far behind. The right-hand column of Table 1 additionally shows countries' share in EU commitments, measured based on countries' relative contributions to the EU budget.

Table 1. Support for Ukraine: Top five countries across three dimensions.

Total bilateral commitments (in billion euros and % of GDP)		Military commitments (in billion euros)		Share in EU commitments (in billion euros)	
EU (Commission and Council)	76.9 (0.50%)	US	42.1	Germany	15.5
US	69.5 (0.33%)	Germany	17.1	France	13.0
Germany	20.9 (0.54%)	UK	6.6	Italy	9.4
UK	13.8 (0.49%)	Norway	3.7	Spain	9.1
Norway	7.45 (1.71%)	Denmark	3.5	Netherlands	6.1

Source: Trebesch et al. (2023).

As indicated, Germany's military support for Ukraine started cautiously, and initial efforts focused on financial and humanitarian support, as well as defensive gear. Defense minister Lambrecht's announcement of January 26, 2021 (and thus before Russia's full-scale invasion), that Germany would show its solidarity with Ukraine by sending 5,000 helmets had caused much ridicule, also among NATO allies, and was seen as an indication that Berlin politics was out of step with the gravity of the situation in Ukraine ("Polen kritisiert," 2022). Yet, it must be recalled that before the Russian full-scale invasion, there had been a tacit consensus among politicians from across the political spectrum that Germany would not provide lethal weapons to

Ukraine. Still, Ukrainian representatives were vocal in demanding military support from Germany. Arms deliveries started reluctantly but slowly grew to cover a wider spectrum of weapons systems. On June 21, 2022, the German federal government eventually released a comprehensive list, updated ever since, of "lethal and non-lethal military support" to Ukraine, distinguishing further between those items that had been delivered and those that were "in preparation/process" (Bundesregierung, 2023c). This process was accompanied by heated debates in the media and public sphere about whether Germany should provide further weapons and which weapons systems the country would be able to deliver.

Debates about weapons culminated in the controversial discussion surrounding the potential delivery of German-made Leopard 2 battle tanks. This had first been suggested by Spain in June 2022 and later also by Poland, but both countries required the German government's approval to export the German-made tanks. Yet, despite mounting pressure and public criticism, the chancellery rejected such proposals. This caused substantial friction within the coalition because the Greens were in favor of delivering heavy weapons to Ukraine, including battle tanks. Foreign Minister Baerbock vocally supported the delivery of Leopard 2 tanks but was apparently called to order by the chancellor (Pausch & Stark, 2023, p. 4). Many months later, on January 25, 2023, the chancellery announced that Germany would prepare the delivery of a first batch of Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, a decision that was coordinated with the US pledge to send M1 Abrams battle tanks (Bundesregierung, 2023b).

Finally, in his *Zeitenwende* speech, Scholz announced that Germany would expand its contribution to NATO's eastern flank, where Germany has been leading a battlegroup in Lithuania since 2017. In June 2023, the new Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, who had succeeded Lambrecht in January of the same year, announced that Germany would increase its commitment in Lithuania to a brigade-size deployment of about 4,000 soldiers, which would be permanently based in Lithuania (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 2023b). This came as a surprise because a "permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" marks a departure from the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which referred to "the current and foreseeable security environment" (as of 1997) and also underlined that "Russia will exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe" (NATO, 2009). Evidently, these conditions are no longer given, as also lined out in the national security strategy, but Germany had long been among those NATO member states that insisted on honoring the principle of non-permanent deployments. Hence, the recent decisions constitute clear evidence of policy change.

5. Changes Across Policy Domains

The third indicator for international orientation change is the observation of substantive changes not just on a single foreign policy issue but in numerous policy domains. This can be affirmed when looking into economic and trade policy, energy policy, and refugee policy, as policy domains where changes have been most visible. First, in a general sense, the extent and dependency on economic relations with autocratic states were called into question, where previously rather naive notions of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) had often motivated political decision-making in Berlin. In itself, this had been a banalization of Willy Brandt's motto "change through rapprochement" (*Wandel durch Annäherung*), which had motivated Brandt's *Ostpolitik* from the 1960s onward, first as mayor of Berlin and later as chancellor. In response to the Russian aggression and as part of coordinated EU measures, Germany supported extensive and unprecedented sanctions against Russia. By Spring 2023, the EU had issued ten sanctions packages, covering a wide array of financial and

economic measures, including the removal of Russian banks from the SWIFT electronic payment system, as well as bans on commodities such as iron, steel, coal, and oil. The only major element missing was a complete gas ban, which had been increasingly called for by commentators and analysts, but which had also met stiff resistance from industry representatives and several European governments ("Gas aus Russland," 2022). Yet, since the outbreak of the war, Germany largely replaced its gas imports from Russia with resources from the Netherlands and Norway, and increasingly through liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, arriving at three newly built LNG terminals, the first of which opened in December 2022. The LNG terminals are part of the German government's initiative to reduce its energy dependency, together with increased investment in renewable energy (Bundesregierung, 2023a).

Relatedly, a striking policy turnabout was the stopping of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. This had been a bone of contention for many years because Nord Stream 2 provided the Russian Federation with direct access to Germany, effectively circumventing Poland and Ukraine as transit countries. Because of its geopolitical implications and environmental reasons, the Greens had been the most vocal critics of the pipeline, urging in their election manifesto for the project to be stopped (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2021, p. 24). Yet such statements did not enter the coalition agreement and the SPD position holding that the pipeline was a "purely economic enterprise," as Scholz had repeatedly declared, prevailed for the time being ("Scholz: Entscheidung über Nord Stream 2," 2021). However, on February 21, 2022, the Russian Duma recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in Eastern Ukraine as "independent states." This constituted a breach of the Minsk agreement and violated reassurances Putin had given just a few days earlier, when Western leaders, including Scholz, had shuttled back and forth to Moscow to find a diplomatic solution to the escalating crisis. The German government responded by announcing that the approval process for Nord Stream 2 would be stopped, which effectively put an end to the pipeline (Bundesregierung, 2022).

Finally, observers have attested to a "paradigm change" in refugee policy, as a response to the Russian invasion and the humanitarian crisis this has caused (Ohliger, 2022, p. 3). As of September 2023, Germany has admitted well above 1 million Ukrainian refugees, by far the largest group across EU member states (followed closely by Poland, with all other countries at some distance). While this created considerable challenges for the swift integration of large numbers of people into education systems and labor markets, it has not led to the same kind of polarization and conflict as the increased migration in 2015 and 2016, which was then caused by the war in Syria. One major difference is that in 2022, the EU activated its Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), to give shelter for Ukrainian refugees. The TPD aims to provide immediate, temporary protection for displaced persons from outside the EU. It was introduced in the wake of the wars of Yugoslav succession but had never been activated, also not during the years 2015 and 2016. While the swift and effective response to the situation in Ukraine has been encouraging, the evident difference in the treatment of refugees from other parts of the globe has also led to justified criticism (e.g., "Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees," 2022).

6. Conclusion

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine marks a watershed moment in international politics that caused an *international orientation change* in German foreign policy. To substantiate this point, I applied the criteria of Hermann's (1990) classic conceptual framework on foreign policy change, including modifications in an actor's role, changes in an actor's international activities, and foreign policy redirection in many issue areas. First, the empirical analysis showed that the self-conception of Germany's foreign policy role is changing, as can be

gleaned from the new security strategy, the Chancellor's *Zeitenwende* speech, the adoption of a FFP, and other documents and statements. Accordingly, Germany's role is moving further away from its traditional foreign policy identity as a "civilian power" (Harnisch & Maull, 2001), which has had a lessening imprint throughout the last two decades (Mello, 2019), towards "becoming the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be," as Scholz (2023a, p. 22) proclaimed. To be sure, this new role has not fully materialized yet, but steps towards it have been taken (cases in point are the European Sky Shield Initiative and NATO's Air Defender exercise under German leadership). In 2019, Gaskarth and Oppermann (2019, p.102) still concluded that due to the prevailing traditions of thought in Germany, it was "unlikely" that the country would become "a more consistent and reliable provider of military security…anytime soon." Arguably, the *Zeitenwende* has changed this.

Second, in terms of program and goal changes, Germany has completely changed its position on weapons deliveries from a cautious focus on non-lethal assistance (which was still the prevailing position in early 2022) to the wholesale support of Ukraine with heavy weaponry, including howitzers, battle tanks, and air defense systems (on the wider implications of this for liberal interventionism, see Olsen, 2024). Likewise, Germany has seen drastic increases in defense spending, including a €100 billion surplus budget, that even required a constitutional change and major increases in the regular defense budget. Finally, Germany has also strengthened its military deployments on NATO's eastern flank, including the announcement that the Bundeswehr would permanently place a brigade in Lithuania, rather than continuing a rotating deployment.

Third, it is apparent that major changes have been introduced not just in the defense and security sectors but also in other policy domains. A major decision was the stopping of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which constituted a policy reversal for the SPD who had long maintained that the pipeline should be considered a "purely economic enterprise," despite sustained criticism from the Greens as their coalition partner. Because of the Russian war, Germany had to diversify its energy imports and make significant changes in the energy and trade sector. Finally, refugee policy has seen major changes, mostly because of the activation of the EU's TPD but also because of changes at the local and regional levels.

While I showed an international orientation change in German foreign policy, this should not be taken to imply that the observed changes are uncontested and unalterable. Nor does it mean that all announced changes have also been implemented. Clearly, the analysis provided evidence of party-political contestation over the nature and extent of the initiated changes. For instance, the delayed decision-making on the NSS bore witness to contesting conceptions of how the political institutions should respond to the challenges of the international environment. In consequence, the NSS publication represents the smallest denominator that the coalition government could agree on (von Hein, 2023). Likewise, the issue of weapons deliveries to Ukraine caused substantial friction within the government, particularly between the SPD and Greens, and the budget considerations have resulted in a compromise solution that will help Germany to attain NATO's 2% goal in the coming years but not thereafter, given current financial planning (Dorn & Schlepper, 2023, p. 26). The gaps between the proclaimed changes and the delayed and incomplete implementation have led some observers to reject any notion of change in German foreign policy (David-Wilp, 2023; Karnitschnig, 2023). But such assessments miss the strides that German foreign policy has made in a short time span. Apart from the qualitative changes in departing from long-standing political dictums, the quantitative indicators (see Table 1) tell a different story. In the wake of the *Zeitenwende*, German foreign policy has indeed undergone an international orientation change, according to Hermann's (1990) conceptual framework.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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