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# CHANGES IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

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## Abstract

The article examines the transformation of Germany's foreign and security policy after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The research aims to determine whether the *Zeitenwende* announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz constitutes a complete reorientation of the Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG) foreign policy or an adaptive modification within its historical continuity.

The study applies a qualitative analytical approach based on Charles Hermann's model of foreign policy change, complemented by the theoretical interpretations of Patrick Mello and Tobias Bunde. Methods of document and discourse analysis are used to examine official strategies (e.g., *National Security Strategy of Germany, 2023*), policy speeches, party programs, and expert publications.

The research identifies profound structural changes in the FRG's defense and energy policies, the redefinition of its international role as a guarantor of European security, and the partial abandonment of long-standing foreign policy paradigms such as *Wandel durch Handel*. Despite these shifts, the *Zeitenwende* remains an ongoing process rather than a completed reorientation.

The findings contribute to the debate on foreign policy adaptation versus transformation under systemic shocks, refining Hermann's model in the context of democratic states.

The study offers insights for European policy-makers regarding strategic autonomy and leadership in a post-American security order.

This research provides one of the first comprehensive assessments of Germany's *Zeitenwende* through a structured theoretical lens, linking conceptual change with empirical political developments.

**Key words:** foreign policy of the FRG, *Zeitenwende*, Federal Chancellor, full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine, reorientation of foreign policy, adaptation of foreign policy within its continuity.

## Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022, became a watershed moment for European security, compelling a profound reassessment of the Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG) foreign and security policy. The Russian aggression not only disrupted the strategic balance in Europe but also dismantled long-standing perceptions within German society that viewed Russia as a reliable partner, revealing instead its authoritarian nature and revisionist ambitions aimed at destabilizing the European geopolitical space.

In response, Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz proclaimed the concept of *Zeitenwende* ("turning point"), signifying Germany's need to adapt to a transformed international environment. This paradigm shift encompassed a significant increase in defense expenditures, a reassessment of

energy dependence on Russia, enhanced support for Ukraine, and a strengthened role of the FRG within NATO.

With the rise to power of Friedrich Merz in 2025, Germany articulated more explicitly its ambition to assume leadership in European security. This was reflected in the creation of new defense alliances, the reform of the Bundeswehr, and the proposal for a European nuclear umbrella. The present article analyzes whether these transformations represent a fundamental reorientation of German foreign policy or constitute an adaptation within its previous strategic trajectory. The analysis employs Charles Hermann's theoretical framework of foreign policy change and integrates the assessments of contemporary scholars such as Patrick Mello and Tobias Bunde.

### ***Theoretical background***

The study builds upon the theoretical framework of foreign policy change developed by Charles F. Hermann (1990), which defines transformation through three interrelated indicators: changes in an actor's international role, policy programs or goals, and the scope of foreign policy activity. This conceptual model is complemented by the analytical perspectives of Patrick Mello and Tobias Bunde, who examine the dynamics of continuity and adaptation in post-Cold War German foreign policy. Their works emphasize the interplay between structural shocks, elite perception, and identity change. The article situates the German *Zeitenwende* within this theoretical context, interpreting it as a critical juncture in which external shocks (Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine) catalyze internal policy and identity transformations. The research also draws upon constructivist approaches in international relations, particularly those addressing foreign policy identity, strategic culture, and the evolution of security paradigms in democratic states.

### ***Research question***

The central research question guiding this study is: Does the "Zeitenwende" signify a fundamental reorientation of Germany's foreign and security policy, or does it represent an adaptive continuation within the long-standing framework of German strategic culture?

Sub-questions include:

1. To what extent have the FRG's role conceptions, policy objectives, and foreign policy instruments changed since February 2022?
2. How has the perception of Russia and the transatlantic alliance influenced Germany's strategic identity?
3. What implications do these shifts have for Germany's future position as a European and global security actor?

### ***Data and methods***

The study employs a qualitative research design, combining document analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative interpretation.

- **Primary sources** include official policy and strategic documents such as the *National Security Strategy of Germany (2023)*, Bundestag speeches by Olaf Scholz and Friedrich Merz, the CDU/CSU programmatic statements (2025), and official communications of the German Ministry of Defense.
- **Secondary sources** encompass scholarly literature and expert analyses (Mello, Bunde, Hermann, Scholz, Pistorius, etc.), as well as EU and NATO reports and major international think-tank assessments.
- **Analytical methods:** qualitative content analysis to identify policy transformations; comparative analysis of pre- and post-*Zeitenwende* approaches; and interpretive synthesis linking theoretical constructs to empirical evidence.

The methodological approach allows tracing both continuity and rupture in Germany's foreign policy identity, demonstrating how structural shocks—such as Russia's war against Ukraine—reshape national security doctrines and leadership strategies.

### **Results and Discussion**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sought to overturn Europe's security order, raising alarm among the Baltic States, Poland, Germany, and other democratic nations. Through its territorial aggression, Russia attempted to redraw the geopolitical map and reassert influence over its former spheres of control — notably including the territory of the former East Germany. Russia's proximity to NATO's eastern flank has consequently emerged as a key threat to both Eastern European and German security.

Amid the probable reduction of U.S. military presence in Europe due to Washington's pivot to the Indo-Pacific, demographic constraints, and the limited economic potential of other European states, Germany faced the imperative of fundamentally rethinking its foreign and defense policy.

Three days after the full-scale invasion, Chancellor Scholz publicly reacted to Russian aggression, introducing the neologism *Zeitenwende* to describe the necessity of perceiving Putin's Russia through the lens of an aggressive war and re-evaluating Germany's strategic role in a destabilized world. In his speech on February 27, 2022, he declared:

“February 24, 2022, marks a watershed in the history of our continent... The world after this will no longer be the same as the world before. The core issue is whether power is allowed to prevail over the law.”

The *Zeitenwende* address announced profound reforms: the establishment of a €100 billion special defense fund requiring constitutional changes, a sustained increase in defense spending, procurement of advanced armaments (including F-35A fighters and Heron drones), and expanded support for NATO's eastern members.

Following 2022, significant shifts occurred within German political consciousness. The perception of Russia as a “spiritually elevated nation” collapsed amid evidence of atrocities in Bucha, Mariupol, and Izium. The Russian threat—once deemed implausible—became tangible. German elites recognized the insufficiency of the Bundeswehr and the vulnerability resulting from excessive dependence on Russian energy, exacerbated by the “special relationship” between Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin, rooted in the shared East German past.

In April 2022, Germany asserted its leadership in coordinating international support for Ukraine through the establishment of the *Ukraine Defense Contact Group* (“Ramstein Format”) under U.S. leadership. The culmination of this strategic shift was the publication of Germany's first-ever *National Security Strategy—Strength. Resilience. Sustainability. Integrated Security for Germany*—presented by Olaf Scholz on June 14, 2023. This document articulated the principle of “integrated security,” encompassing military, diplomatic, economic, and domestic dimensions to address threats ranging from warfare and espionage to energy dependence and climate risks.

This signified a transition from a narrowly military conception of security to a comprehensive one, aiming to mobilize all national resources to ensure resilience and deterrence.

The subsequent academic debate has revolved around whether the *Zeitenwende* constituted a genuine reorientation or merely an adaptive continuity of Germany's foreign policy. Patrick Mello interprets the *Zeitenwende* as a paradigmatic change, aligning with Charles Hermann's criteria of role transformation, policy redirection, and expansion of activity.

Under Scholz and Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht, Germany began to reconceptualize its role as a guarantor of European security, bridge-builder within the EU, and advocate of multilateralism. The *National Security Strategy* explicitly defined Russia as “the greatest threat” to Euro-Atlantic peace, while depicting China as a “partner,” “competitor,” and “systemic rival.”

Programmatically, Germany's policies underwent deep transformation: the creation of the €100 billion defense fund, massive rearmament, and the unprecedented supply of heavy weaponry to Ukraine marked a decisive break with the long-standing principle of abstaining from arms exports to conflict zones. Militarily, Germany emerged as the second-largest donor after the United States.

Berlin further reinforced its commitments on NATO's eastern flank, notably by deploying a permanent brigade of approximately 4,000 troops in Lithuania—an explicit departure from previous non-permanent basing principles. Simultaneously, Germany imposed large-scale sanctions on Russia, diversified energy imports, halted the *Nord Stream 2* project, and accepted approximately 1.25 million Ukrainian refugees by early 2025.

According to Tobias Bunde, these shifts signify not only policy innovation but the erosion of deeply embedded paradigms—such as *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade), the conviction that Europe's security depends on cooperation with Russia, and the self-image of Germany as a “civilian power” rejecting military instruments.

Nevertheless, Bunde contends that while Russia's invasion catalyzed a foreign policy identity crisis, the transformation remains incomplete. The persistence of debates on “defensive” versus “offensive” arms deliveries, and societal skepticism toward deterrence, illustrate Germany's partial adaptation rather than a full strategic metamorphosis.

The election of Friedrich Merz as Chancellor in February 2025 accelerated Germany's aspiration for European leadership. Merz's government prioritized Ukraine's victory, the creation of a European defense community, and the establishment of a European nuclear deterrent. The *Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU)* program envisioned a comprehensive modernization of the Bundeswehr, increased defense spending to 5% of GDP, and the establishment of a National Security Council to coordinate diplomacy, defense, and economic policy.

Merz's initiative to revive the *Weimar Triangle* (Germany–France–Poland), his strategic cooperation with the United Kingdom, and support for nuclear energy diversification demonstrate an assertive repositioning of Germany's global role. The FRG has positioned itself as the central pillar of European security architecture in a world of declining American engagement.

## Conclusions

The analysis indicates that the *Zeitenwende* represents a profound transformation of Germany's foreign and security policy, driven by the recognition of Russia as an existential threat to European order and by the necessity of strategic autonomy within the transatlantic alliance.

However, the evolution of German foreign policy remains ongoing. Under Friedrich Merz, the FRG has embarked on the path toward becoming a genuine European leader in defense and security. While the process has yet to culminate in a complete reorientation, the trajectory points toward the realization of a full-fledged *Zeitenwende* in German foreign policy.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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