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Commentary Series on Putin's War: "The World as It Is. Germany's New Foreign Policy and Russia's War in Ukraine."

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The Decision

Russia's war in Ukraine has caused a tectonic shift in Germany's foreign policy. German leaders have acknowledged an urgent need to contain and deter Vladimir Putin's Russia. On 27 February, in a cutting-edge parliamentary address, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced the establishment of an unprecedented one-time 100 billion euro (\$113 billion) fund for the German military this year and committed Germany henceforth to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense.¹ On 26 February, the government in Berlin joined its NATO allies in delivering anti-tank systems and anti-aircraft weapons to Ukraine. Since the start of its tenure in December 2021, the new German coalition government of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals has long refused to make this fundamental change. It has hidden away behind the traditional and values-driven German "civilian-power" approach and its focus on non-military means and soft power as key factors in Germany's diplomacy.² The revolution in Germany foreign policy signals that the country is increasingly accepting the world as it. Courage and defense capabilities are essential to live in freedom and peace. "We must put a stop to warmongers like Putin," Scholz said. "That requires strength of our own,"³ he added.

Following Up

The next task for the Scholz government is to follow up. The announcements have to be backed by long-term strategic thinking and investments in the emergence of a new strategic culture in Germany. It will take years until the effects of the program will be visible. In the meantime, the government will need the backbone to stand up for it in German budget debates. It will need to prioritize AI and cyber and pool its efforts with the US and its European partners. All of this has to take into account the fundamental geopolitical changes and Russia's role as a revisionist power and an outlier. In a nutshell, Germany has to pick up the ball where the Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder governments dropped it in the 1990s during

¹ See Jeff Rathke, Putin Accidentally Started a Revolution in Germany," *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/27/putin-war-ukraine-germany-scholz-revolution/>.

² See Katrin Bennhold, Where Is Germany in the Ukraine Standoff? Its Allies Wonder," *New York Times*, 25 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/europe/germany-russia-nato-ukraine.html>.

³ Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

the discussions about NATO out-of-area missions in Bosnia and NATO's war to save Kosovo in 1999. Germany lost almost 30 years until Scholz put in the emergence break and embarked on a U-turn.

The sudden shift in Berlin is perhaps less a consequence of new insight and analysis. Rather, it emerged because the federal government did not have much of a choice. Mentally, plenty of leading German actors in the Social Democratic and Green Parties still remain connected to the traditional peace movement and its bias against NATO and defense spending. Their long-held assumptions will not quickly wane and will complicate implementation. It will take time for Germany to adjust to its new role. The modernization of Germany's nuclear-capable fighter jets is as an essential factor in this endeavor: In his landmark speech on 27 February, Scholz indicated that the government will likely purchase F-35 aircraft instead of the previously planned F/A-18 Super Hornets.

In parallel, the Scholz government has to address the consequences of the halt in the North Stream 2 pipeline project, which came prior to Russia's full-fledged Ukraine invasion when Russia formally recognized two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine. Will Germany abandon the pipeline forever or will the project go operational under certain conditions? How will Scholz react in response to the predictable further increase in energy costs? Will public opinion in Germany sustain the foreign policy revolution against the backdrop of rapidly increasing energy prices?

Ukraine

First of all, Germany needs a new policy toward Ukraine. Since Putin's ascent 20 years ago, Germany has neglected Ukraine and has put all its eggs in Russia's basket. Several German governments have pursued the expansion of Germany's natural gas trade with Russia, and former Chancellor Schröder has maintained much-criticized business ties with Putin's kleptocratic regime – all of which happened at the expense of Ukraine. German policy makers and business representatives alike have long underestimated Putin's ruthlessness.

In 2008, Germany was the major opponent of the possible granting of NATO membership to Ukraine.⁴ At the April 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier prevented Ukraine from gaining Membership Action Plan status.⁵ This was a historic mistake because it signaled that NATO was recognizing Putin's sphere of influence in Ukraine. Now, Germany has an obligation to play a leading role in assisting Ukraine in its fight against an unhinged Putin. Moreover, in an unprecedented move, the European Union has just announced that it will purchase and deliver weapons to Ukraine. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen indicated that the EU wants Ukraine to join: "They are one of us and we want them in,"⁶ she emphasized. This could be a game changer and give Ukraine the prospect of a prosperous future as long as its alignment is not settled.

NATO

Within the Social Democratic Party, the pragmatist and hard-nosed Scholz has made the case for a reevaluation of the SPD's outdated Ostpolitik approach. After his recent visit in Moscow, and after witnessing the brutality of Putin's invasion in Ukraine, Scholz abandoned the old rationale of economic interdependence and arms control with Russia. Historically, there

⁴ For the context, see Liana Fix, *Germany's Role in European Russia Policy. A New German Power?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁵ By Walter Zarycky, "Why the Bucharest Summit Still Matters Ten Years On," *Atlantic Council*, Ukraine Alert, 4 May 2018. For the context, see Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership. U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁶ See Emma Anderson, "Ukraine Belongs in EU, Commission Chief von der Leyen Says," *Politico*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-eu-commission-chief-von-der-leyen-invite/>.

are many parallels to the deployment of Euromissiles in Germany in the first half of the 1980s. Germany's new defense fund is a "Pershing moment,"⁷ as former Secretary of State George Shultz might have put it. Back in the early 1980s, NATO's deployment of Pershing II and Cruise Missiles was a turning point in the Cold War. It signaled strength and NATO's willingness to match the Soviet Union's buildup in Intermediate Nuclear Forces. Much like the Pershings, the new German defense program is conceived as a sharp recalibration and envisaged as a game changer to sober up Putin.

Scholz's landmark address indicates his conviction that meaningful dialogue and arms control have to begin with one's own strength. Shultz once said that "if you go to a negotiation and you do not have any strength, you are going to get your head handed to you. On the other hand, the willingness to negotiate builds strength because you are using it for a constructive purpose. If it is strength with no objective to be gained, it loses its meaning. [...] These are not alternative ways of going about things."⁸ Apparently, Scholz will pursue a similar rationale. The new defense fund will enable Germany to approach Russia from a new position of strength instead of vulnerability and energy dependence. All of this will take time, however.

Central and Eastern Europe

Moreover, Scholz highlighted Germany's expanded commitments including its increased presence in Lithuania and its willingness to provide air defense systems for its Eastern European NATO allies. NATO will soon have to take a decision over major force deployments in the Baltics, Poland, and perhaps also Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia. So far, the NATO battlegroups in the Baltics and Poland have been used primarily for reassurance and deterrence and not for actual defense vis-à-vis the kind of Russian forces that have invaded Ukraine.

NATO has to discuss whether and when it should abandon the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act in which it made serious concessions and renounced deployments of nuclear weapons in new NATO member states. NATO could give Putin an ultimatum to put limits on nuclear deployments in Russia including in Kaliningrad. In case of Putin's rejection, NATO could formally withdraw from the Founding Act, which Russia has already grossly violated with its annexation of Crimea and the start of its war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. If Putin fails to respond, NATO might consider the deployment of forward based nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe in order to match Russia's capabilities in this field of weaponry.

Russia

When Putin put his nuclear forces on high alert, the Biden Administration did not follow suit and decided instead to deescalate the situation instead of aggravating Putin's paranoia.⁹ To what extent can the West still work with Putin? What kind of leverage does it have to work for regime change in Russia whether this is official Western policy or not? How can Western leaders trust Putin after all that has happened in the last couple of days? How can they build an off-ramp for Putin to exit the war he has started? And how can Ukraine be a part of larger European security agenda? Is a revival of the Helsinki process possible if Putin stays in the Kremlin? How can Europe's security structure be rebuilt from scratch? Is this at all possible in the current situation?

In late January, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov discussed reciprocal transparency measures regarding force posture in Ukraine as well as measures to increase confidence regarding military

⁷ "Reagan Administration Secretary of State Reflects on His Tenure and Tillerson's," *NPR*, 4 October 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/04/555710502/reagan-administration-secretary-of-state-reflects-on-his-tenure-and-tillersons>.

⁸ Interview between James E. Goodby and George P. Shultz, *The Foreign Service Journal*, December 2016, see <http://www.afsa.org/groundbreaking-diplomacy-interview-george-shultz>, accessed 22 December 2017.

⁹ See David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Putin Declares a Nuclear Alert, and Biden Seeks De-escalation," *New York Times*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/us/politics/putin-nuclear-alert-biden-deescalation.html>.

exercises and maneuvers in Europe. Lavrov was not interested in serious diplomacy, however. In the long-term, the dialogue on transparency and confidence building could pave the way for a renewal of nuclear arms control talks. This might take several years if Putin manages to stay in power – and it would presuppose an enormous increase in NATO’s armaments to sober Putin up.

In the long-run, it is questionable whether Russia might be willing and capable to envisage itself as a partner of the West. Putin has long acted to create Russia’s own world – and Western policymakers have not sufficiently understood that. In 2006, scholar Dmitri Trenin already warned that “until recently, Russia saw itself as Pluto in the Western solar system, very far from the center but still fundamentally a part of it. Now it has left that orbit entirely: Russia’s leaders have given up on becoming part of the West and have started creating their own Moscow-centered system.”¹⁰ It took Germany 15 years to act forcefully on this premise. Putin’s infamous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference should have been understood as a clear warning. Back then, Putin told the world who he really was.¹¹ He lambasted the West and the idea of a global liberal order. He criticized what he perceived as “an almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.”¹² We know now that Putin is determined to use his military forces in unconstrained ways. Will he break the nuclear taboo and launch nuclear weapons in Ukraine?¹³

Germany’s Domestic Agenda

In many ways, Germany’s idealistic foreign policy notions and its naïve Russia policy have helped to increase Russia’s military strength. Moreover, Germany’s special energy relationship with Putin’s Russia has severely weakened NATO. The Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines annoyed Germany’s NATO allies in the East, especially Poland. In 2006, Polish Defense Minister Radek Sikorski compared the planned Nord Stream 1 pipeline to the 1939 Hitler-Stalin deal partitioning Poland. “Poland has a particular sensitivity to corridors and deals above our head. That was the Locarno tradition, that was the Molotov-Ribbentrop tradition. That was the 20th century. We don’t want any repetition of that,”¹⁴ Sikorski said. Poland’s NATO accession freed Germany from its previous Cold War position as NATO’s vulnerable Eastern frontline states. NATO enlargement gave the unified Federal Republic stability on its Eastern borders and reinsurance against a volatile Russia. The Schröder and Merkel governments used Germany’s new position for a free ride in defense affairs and Russia deals over Poland’s head. Hopefully, the new German approach will help the Scholz government to establish a new strategic partnership with Poland.

A change in mentality will be another key ingredient in Germany’s adjustment and its new foreign policy. After the end of the Cold War, Germany was supposed to help defend the liberal order. During the Cold War, West Germany had been an importer of security and perhaps the greatest beneficiary of NATO’s collective defense. After unification, Germany had to redefine its interest but was hesitant to adjust its policies. Unified Germany abstained from the military operations in the

¹⁰ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Leaves the West,” *Foreign Affairs* 85:4 (2006), 87-96. For context, see Angela Stent, *Putin’s World. Russia against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve, 2019).

¹¹ See Daniel Fried and Kurt Volcker, “The Speech in which Putin Told Us Who He Was,” *Politico*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>.

¹² “Transcript: 2007 Putin Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” <https://russialist.org/transcript-putin-speech-and-the-following-discussion-at-the-munich-conference-on-security-policy/>.

¹³ See Francesca Giovanni, “A Hurting Stalemate? The Risk of Nuclear Weapon Use in the Ukraine Crisis,” in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 27 February 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/02/a-hurting-stalemate-the-risks-of-nuclear-weapon-use-in-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

¹⁴ See Mark Bundermann, Poland Compares German-Russian Pipeline to Nazi-Soviet Pact, *EU Observer*, 2 May 2006, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/21486>.

Gulf War. The Kohl government referred to constitutional reasons that made out-of-area operations impossible. At the time, Ronald Asmus, a leading Germany expert from the RAND Corporation, noted that “it is not clear whether Germany would have acted differently during the Gulf crisis even in the absence of the constitutional limitations that officially prevented Bonn from taking a more active role. The full explanation for German behavior must be sought in a mindset shaped by their traumas of their history, political culture as it relates to the role of military power as a tool of statecraft, and perceptions of how their foreign policy leeway is limited by the attitudes of their neighbors and allies,”¹⁵ Asmus noted.

Germany was supposed to debate its new international role, but German policymakers were hesitant to discuss Germany’s strategic interest in the Gulf region at all. Instead, as Asmus wrote, “the terms were set by such issues as whether Germans ‘owed’ the United States political support in the Gulf in return for American support during the unification process.”¹⁶ As a historian and a child of the World War II, Chancellor Kohl thought that Germany’s post-Cold War adjustment needed more time. It would take time for the Germans to unlearn their disinterest in military affairs, Kohl thought. “In the former days, Germans were criticized for never taking their jack-boots off. Now, it was difficult to get them to put them on again. Unlike Britain and France, there was no consensus on the basic issues of defence,”¹⁷ Kohl told British Prime Minister Major in February 1991. It was a challenge for the Germans to assume a more normal international role.¹⁸

When the Yugoslavian wars started, most Germans assumed that Germany’s involvement in the Balkans during World War II would prevent the Bundeswehr from participating in NATO’s out-of-area missions in region. In the 1990s, Defense Minister Volker R  he was among the key figures who argued that Germany had to grow into more responsibility.¹⁹ While Germany remained absent in the Gulf War, it participated in NATO’s peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and even assumed a full combat role in the 1999 war to save Kosovo. Thereafter, Germany’s new commitments were increasingly put into question. The Schr  der government was strongly opposed to the US-led invasion in Iraq. While Germany assumed a role in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, the Merkel government did not participate at all in NATO’s 2011 mission Operation Unified Protector in Libya. In a 2012 Atlantic Council report, a senior NATO official referred to Germany as a “lost nation,” and the authors of the reports concluded that “today, Germany is an economic powerhouse, but a second-rate political and military power. German weakness is NATO’s most significant problem. A stronger Germany would be the greatest boost to NATO’s future.”²⁰ However, the Merkel government remained opposed to the idea of a global NATO. The Germans refused to discuss issues like the Syrian civil war in the North Atlantic Council.

¹⁵ Ronald Asmus, “Germany after the Gulf War,” RAND Note N-3391-AF, Santa Monica, 1992, see <https://www.rand.org/pubs/notes/N3391.html>.

¹⁶ Asmus, “Germany after the Gulf War.”

¹⁷ Memcon Major and Kohl, 11 February 1991, in The National Archives (TNA), Prime Minister Office Files (PREM 19), Vol. 3352.

¹⁸ See Frank Stengel, *The Politics of Military Force. Antimilitarism, Ideational Change, and Post-Cold War German Security Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

¹⁹ See Volker R  he, *Deutschland Verantwortung. Perspektiven f  r das neue Europa* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1994).

²⁰ See Nicholas Burns, Damon Wilson, and Jeff Lightfoot, “Anchoring the Alliance,” 14 May 2012, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/anchoring-the-alliance/>.

Until last week, Germany had deliberately stayed away from taking major new initiatives in NATO for more than two decades.²¹

After the end of the Cold War, German foreign policy makers were not prepared for a return of geopolitics and the use of force in international relations. In Germany, there was a widespread notion that the end of the Cold War did indeed mark the end of history. The younger generation grew up with a romantic notion of international affairs. In a remarkable article on foreign policy attitudes of German millennials, Ulrike Franke of the European Council of Foreign Relations wrote that “we’ve intellectually – and practically – disarmed. As we never had to train our strategic muscle, it atrophied. Power politics is at odds with our understanding of how the world works. We don’t have our brains wired in this way, don’t speak the language – and thus are utterly unprepared to face opponents with different interests who are increasingly vocal in questioning what we thought was, ultimately, the only system.”²²

It was wrong for Germany to assume that the world has simply moved to a new era beyond power politics. The post-Cold War era has reminded us that war, fragmentation, and ethnic conflicts are continuous challenges even in Europe. The world has not stood still and Germany’s moral superiority did not help either. Germany has lost 30 years in addressing the challenges in an age of uncertainty. In 1992, the British Ambassador in Bonn, Mallaby, noted that “foreign policy is another field where Germany has not found its feet following unification. Kohl has told the Germans that they must fulfill their responsibilities. But no-one has tried to define those, or to establish a new concept for foreign policy. [...] Germany is awash with Angst.”²³ Angst was perhaps among the key factors in Germany’s Russia statecraft over the last 20 years. German policymakers invoked the past and were hesitant to confront Putin, thereby giving him the benefit of the doubt. Mentally, the Germans may be anxious about a normal and robust foreign policy, but they have to unlearn their helplessness at a time when the battle in Ukraine drags on and becomes a war of endurance.²⁴

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²¹ See Tobias Bunde, “Has Germany Become NATO’s ‘Lost Nation’? Prospects for a Reinvigorated German NATO Policy,” American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 6 December 2013, <https://www.aicgs.org/publication/has-germany-become-natos-lost-nation-prospects-for-a-reinvigorated-german-nato-policy/>.

²² Ulrike Franke, “A Millennial Considers the New German Problem after 30 Years of Peace,” War on the Rocks, 19 May 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/a-millennial-considers-the-new-german-problem-after-30-years-of-peace/>.

²³ Despatch Mallaby to Foreign Office, “Germany: United, but Troubled,” 18 December 1992, in TNA, PREM 19/4164/2.

²⁴ Munich Security Report 2022, “Turning the Tide. Unlearning Helplessness,” <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2022/>.