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An end to Germany's end of history

More than a year ago, Olaf Scholz proclaimed the Zeitenwende. But what this means for the country's foreign and security policy, no one seems to know

Three days after Russian troops invaded Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz addressed the German Bundestag on 27 February 2022. He referred to the event as a *Zeitwende* (a turning point), a term that has been constantly quoted in the international media ever since. Scholz said that the circumstances which German foreign and security policy was based on had changed dramatically, calling for some realignments, such as viewing Russia as an aggressor and, therefore, a threat to Europe's security, strengthening the Ukrainian and German armed forces, agreeing on an EU security policy, diversifying the national energy supply and ramping up efforts to build social and state resilience.

And yet, German politics, business, science, the media and civil society expressed very different independent opinions and positions. Despite this 'turning point' clearly labelled as such, it seemed as if a significant number of decision-makers and society players wanted to carry on as usual, as they had done in supposedly less tumultuous times.

Germany's end of history

During the Cold War, Germany had evolved into a trading power to be reckoned with, without having to fear criticism of its foreign policy. And, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a united Germany benefited from EU expansion, while the globalisation of the highly developed German economy offered unimaginable opportunities for growth. The proverbial 'end of history' suited countries like Germany very well – a technologically innovative economy that also had a globally integrated dynamic financial market, solid institutions and a stable currency.

Germany became not only a saturated status-quo nation but also an export superpower, serving to maximise corporate profits and generate prosperity to increase strategic maxims that would maintain stability and, in turn, peace in this world order that was supported by every other

liberal democracy. These fundamental assumptions formed the basis for a socio-political consensus and defined security policy in Germany until the new government came into power in 2021 and Olaf Scholz took over as Chancellor from Angela Merkel.

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Scholz's speech was now a clear sign that the expansionary trade policy that Germany needed had to be combined with the new, tough realities of foreign and security policy. There is no consensus on this of course, let alone on how to achieve it.

Germany found itself in a historically unique situation after the end of the Cold War, surrounded by friends for over three decades. And successive governments were able to simply take foreign and security matters as they came - without negative political consequences. But the invasion of Ukraine changed everything.

Germany now needs to act rather than react in its foreign and security policy: decision-makers and wider society must rediscover their collective responsibility for the country, as well as their obligations, and act consistently in what they say and what they do. The sum of all the individual interests alone does not add up to the common good.

Designing a new foreign and security policy

There are three things to consider:

Firstly, national and collective credibility within the EU and NATO is a huge asset. After Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's clear alignment with the West came Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik,* aimed at reunification and reconciliation with Eastern Europe. Initially highly controversial, it has since become a core component of German foreign and security policy for successive governments and was also welcomed by the transatlantic alliance.

The continuation of this policy - the desire to unite Europe and integrate Russia into the European and transatlantic security structure after the fall of the Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union - received similar support. This was also the case in the US under President Barack Obama's reset in 2009, at least until the end of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency in Russia in 2012. But this came to an abrupt end when Russia annexed Crimea, and criticism grew.

European security can no longer be thought of solely as European.

Now, since February 2022, Germany - given its anchoring in Europe - needs to make a new attempt to design a foreign and security policy that meets the new requirements and the country's security and economic interests, in conjunction with the EU and still in line with the transatlantic perspective. An approach that must be supported by society at large.

No simple task, because this is uncharted territory. This security upheaval is neither a second Cold War nor a repetition of any other historical dispute, because European security can no longer be thought of solely as European. Countries such as China, India and Brazil want to be more involved in setting political standards.

Secondly, finding answers to this situation requires strategic thinking. It should be based on a critical discussion about a common understanding of where Germany stands in the global world and what foreign policy goals it wants to pursue – as a nation, as a member of the EU and NATO, as well as a state that wants to take the initiative.

Thirdly, this requires defence capabilities and, at the same time, a commitment to global diplomacy and crisis prevention, in order to help shape cooperation, competition and conflict to be as non-violent as possible, in Germany's interests and that of its allies.

Without a sociopolitical consensus on these issues, this 'turning point' will be a journey without a destination.

It would be hard to argue against this. Yet, there are still issues that might not be completely resolved but must still be addressed. This includes the question of how an expansionist trade policy can be successfully combined with a foreign and security policy that is based primarily on values and standards.

For it is not clear whether trade with like-minded partners can allow Germany and the EU to prosper while also boosting their security. And there is also the unanswered question of how secure Europe and the world are when they are divided into the blocs of the good (mostly democracies) and the bad (mostly autocracies or even dictatorships). Finally, German citizens will wonder how global problems such as climate change, food security, terrorism and migration can be tackled together and at the required speed under these confrontational circumstances.

Without a sociopolitical consensus on these issues, this 'turning point'

will be a journey without a destination, with dramatic consequences for democracy, prosperity and security in Germany and every other EU member state.



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