FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 09.03.2022 | Rachel Rizzo

How Germany can secure Europe's strategic independence

Germany's investment in its neglected defence sector was well received in the US. But it takes more to turn this short moment into a strategic shift

Since Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, time seems to be moving at warp speed. Each day brings new horrors of the reality of war on the ground, with photos and videos of Ukrainians fighting for their lives and their land. Europe and the United States have largely been in lockstep in their response — implementing harsh sanctions against Russia that have, in essence, tanked the Russian rouble, locked Russia out of the global banking system, and turned it into a global pariah state.

NATO countries have sent defensive weapons to Ukraine, and the Alliance engaged the NATO Response Force for the first time in a collective security engagement in history. The most shocking development from transatlantic allies, however, has been Germany's 180-degree in foreign policy in the matter of days.

A shift from pacifism and war guilt

After suspending the certification process of Nord Stream 2 and announcing that Germany would send 1,000 anti-tank weapons and 500 stinger missiles to Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a speech to the Bundestag on 27 February highlighting further steps that Germany would take. This includes the potential purchase of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jet, and the promise to 'anchor a €100bn defence fund in the country's constitution and exceed a NATO-wide annual spending goal. Jaws across the Atlantic dropped in unison. As I wrote for the Atlantic Council after the announcement, Scholz's speech would've been a surprise a week ago, it would've been absolutely unthinkable just a month ago.

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The shock behind Germany's decision is multi-faceted, and there's no easy way to describe what, exactly, is behind the shift. Of course,

and investment in the armed forces.

watching Russia invade its next-door neighbour was a wake-up call, but the response goes further than what most, especially the United States, expected of Berlin. It seems that Germany might go beyond simply spending more on defence and readying its military after decades of inattention and underinvestment. Instead, it looks like Germany might be on the precipice of something even more important: a fundamental shift in mindset. In fact, according to a snap poll, 78 per cent of Germans support the arms exports and investment in the armed forces. Although still early, it appears as if the country might finally be willing to take its place as a rightful leader and champion on European defence.

Thus far, Germany's reticence to play this leadership role has caused frustration on both sides of the Atlantic. As everyone remembers, a key component of the Trump administration was the consistent harping on Germany for not spending enough on its defence budget. But Trump wasn't the first president to make this point — he just said it louder than most. What people seem to forget, however, is that more money on defence doesn't just appear out of thin air. There must be public support behind it, or else leaders risk their political future.

In Germany, there simply hasn't been enough public support for greater defence spending to justify a chancellor making it a key component of their platform. Although German pacifism and war-guilt has been part of the problem, the reticence goes deeper than that; to the heart of how Germany views itself as a member of the European Union and the global community more broadly. Germans didn't support a bigger defence budget because they simply didn't view Germany as a country that should take on that role.

A European shift

Although Germany is a particularly stark example, Europe as a whole has also shown a lack of investment and interest in stepping up to the plate. As Ivan Krastev wrote for the New York Times: 'For the past 30 years, Europeans have convinced themselves that military strength was not worth the cost and that American military pre-eminence was enough to dissuade other countries from pursuing war.'

However, the last couple of weeks have changed everything. The idea that

war will never again come to the European continent has been thrown out the window. Although NATO has no plans to get militarily involved on the ground, Europeans must step up to the plate and be ready to defend the democracy that they hold so dear. They must start by taking the matter of defence more seriously.

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The decisions by Chancellor Scholz are a welcome shift in policy, however, the difficult part comes next. It's easy to look at a dictator rolling tanks over sovereign territory and bombing innocent civilians and feel the need to 'do something'. This might explain Germany's public support for a more robust response. It's much harder, however, to take a moment in time and turn it into a long-term strategic shift. This is exactly what Chancellor Scholz must do next.

Scholz must stay true to his coalition's commitment to increase Europe's strategic independence. It was a hard goal to begin with, but this moment can't be squandered. Thus far, the vision for a more independent Europe has been a largely championed by French President Macron. Going forward, Scholz must take this vison just as seriously. The puzzle pieces are all on the table now, Scholz just needs to put them all together. Perhaps somewhat ironically, the name of the current German government's *Koalitionsvertrag* was 'Dare more Progress'. The moment for more progress is here.



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