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Where is Germany's foreign policy heading?

The war on Ukraine has led to a profound transformation of German foreign policy. But open questions about its long-term implications remain

Turning point, watershed moment, paradigm shift: there's been no shortage of headlines describing the change in Germany's foreign and security policy since the outbreak of war. The tough sanctions regime against Russia and the start of arms shipments to Ukraine were its first signs. Subsequently, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's historic speech during an emergency session of the German parliament consolidated it – with facts and figures.

Scholz announced that Germany will increase its defence spending to more than two per cent of GDP, and that a special €100bn fund for military investment and acquisitions is to be enshrined in the constitution. Other taboos have also vanished into thin air: the armed forces are set to be strengthened on a scale not seen since the Cold War through the purchase of armed military drones, the provision of new aircraft to extend Germany's participation in nuclear sharing arrangements, and the acceleration of joint European defence projects.

But the emergency session didn't just herald a fresh start in commitments to defence spending, it also marked a turning point in Germany's foreign policy. Scholz's speech has called the traditional trinity of German foreign policy – Western alignment, 'Ostpolitik',and European integration – into question. For now, the chancellor has rejected the guiding principle that security in Europe can only be achieved together *with* Russia.

Most politicians in the ruling coalition – and to some extent opposition figures too – voiced a clear disenchantment with Russia, a profound disappointment about the invasion and anger about the breach of international law. After all the diplomatic efforts to stave off war, profound disillusionment about the Kremlin's actions and the calculating, cold-blooded thinking behind the attack on Ukraine reigned

supreme.

A break with Germany's culture of restraint

Germany's relationship with Russia, which has never ceased to be of particular importance, has fundamentally changed. Foreign policy concepts such as 'Wandel durch Annäherung' (change through rapprochement) or 'Wandel durch Handel' (change through trade) have been consigned to the dustbin of history. Instead, a logic of confrontation towards the Putin regime now prevails – and Cold War vocabulary such as 'deterrence' and 'containment' is back. As the chancellor has had to reluctantly acknowledge, dialogue requires the other side to be willing to talk.

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In this context, it's worth asking how profound the changes in German foreign policy truly are. For her part, German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock drew a far-reaching conclusion from the events of recent days: 'Perhaps this marks the day that Germany puts a type of singular and solitary restraint in foreign and security policy behind it. These self-imposed rules cannot allow us to duck our responsibility. If the world is now a different place, then our policy has to be different too.'

Germany's decision to supply arms to Ukraine is a first step towards breaking with this culture of restraint. The announced increase in defence spending, on the other hand, isn't necessarily a signal that the country is moving towards a more militarised foreign policy – the focus remains on defence. What it does, however, represent in the eyes of many observers is a shift in the key historical reference point for social democratic foreign policy: it is moving away from Willy Brandt's 'Ostpolitik', his foreign policy ofrapprochement with the East, and towards the resolute security policy pursued by Helmut Schmidt around the time of NATO's Double-Track Decision – though the swift decisions of recent days are, in fact, likely to have more far-reaching consequencesthan those of 40 years ago.

At the same time, Germany's new direction leaves many unanswered questions that will have to be debated over the coming weeks and months – even if the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine cannot yet be foreseen. Alongside accelerating the process of turning Europe into a sovereign

actor, the short- to medium-term focus will be on relations with Russia.

Three questions

With regard to Russia, there are three key issues to address: firstly, avoiding further escalation; secondly, an exit strategy from the current conflict; and thirdly, Russia's place in Europe.

To date, the policy mix of sanctions, arms shipments and strong focus on the person of President Putin, which is almost reminiscent of relations with North Korea, risks further escalating and spreading the conflict – a conflict that involves no less than a nuclear power. That's why keeping military and diplomatic back channels open is essential – especially those between the US and Russia – and why NATO states need to urgently ensure they don't give the impression of actively intervening in the conflict. Governments should avoid announcements regarding the use of European military aircraft in support of Ukraine, refrain from the idea of a NATO-enforced no-fly-zone or similar activist measures, while the sanctions regime should continue to rigorously differentiate between elite and population to avoid fostering a siege mentality within Russia.

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Secondly, there needs to be an exit strategy from live conflict that also gives Putin a face-saving way to quit the field. By removing sanctions piecemeal as soon there is any sign of concessions from the other side, Germany and the EU can play a critical role here. Even if agreeing compromises with this regime goes against the grain, the focus has to be on ending hostilities as soon as possible and preventing further escalation. Any talk of supporting regime change in Moscow is counterproductive; a situation in which the regime is fighting for its very survival should be avoided, not least because of its nuclear arsenal.

Thirdly, we need to already be thinking conceptually about Russia's and Ukraine's future place in Europe. Despite all the expressions of solidarity with the latter, we shouldn't forget that, until recently, NATO membership for Ukraine was 'not on the agenda', while accession to the EU remains more a hypothetical scenario and would, in reality, not gain widespread approval. Therefore, hasty promises of EU accession are a sure way to future disappointment.

To prevent Ukraine from becoming a permanent island of instability on

the edge of Europe, one in which conflict with Russia flares up again and again, notions such as neutrality, demilitarisation, and security guarantees need to be given serious consideration. In order to make these notions sustainable and credible, the decision on the way forward remains obviously with the Ukrainian government. To be able to begin shaping a new, peaceful European order in the future, Europe needs to pay close attention to the developments in Russia and notice the precise moment at which security *with* Russia seems feasible once more.

A revision of the pillars of German foreign policy

All three of these aspects – just some of many – illustrate that the shift in Germany's foreign policy is not like the flicking of a switch. Instead, it's about intelligently connecting up the individual pillars of German foreign policy. The first of these pillars is its commitment to the NATO alliance and, even more importantly, its desire to drive European integration with the aim of establishing the EU as a sovereign actor on the world stage. After all, the euphoria around Western unity shouldn't mask the fact that, in future, a transatlanticist US president is more likely to be the exception than the rule.

The geopolitical fact that Russia remains a key neighbour to the EU's east cannot and should not be ignored.

The pillars of German foreign policy will also continue to include an obligation to carefully consider Germany's special responsibility for international law and human rights – and to act accordingly. This obligation remains a unique historical characteristic of the country's foreign policy and cannot be cast off with just one parliamentary speech. While bolstering the armed forces' defence capabilities does not necessarily contradict this, a willingness to launch military interventions would be a very different matter.

The third pillar of Germany's foreign policy is and will remain its responsibility for Eastern Europe and, in particular, its efforts to secure long-term stability and peace in the region. Those endeavours, hitherto pursued under the banner of 'Ostpolitik', now need to be redefined in light of Russia's war of aggression. A start would be to cast off the term of 'Ostpolitik' and start a differentiated approach to the European neighbours in the East as well as Russia.

Nonetheless, the geopolitical fact that Russia remains a key neighbour to

the EU's east cannot and should not be ignored. That fact requires us to come up with answers to such questions as: What does deterrence mean today and what role can Germany and its forces play here? As of this week, the answer to the latter is no longer contingent on the budgetary situation. That's a step in the right direction. How can we check Russia's pursuit of greater influence while still avoiding escalation? What channels exist for dialogue and what would our objectives be, not least in view of the transnational and even planetary challenges? Only by finding viable answers that go beyond current announcements can we make sure the paradigm shift of recent weeks doesn't do lasting harm to our future prospects.



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