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[Conflict-ready? Western Foreign Policy in Times of Systemic Rivalry](#)

Always One Step Behind?

German Security Policy after the NATO Summit in Madrid

Philipp Dienstbier

The war in Ukraine is functioning as a catalyst for the reordering of transatlantic security policy, which has been ongoing since 2014. Germany's *Zeitenwende* has laid important groundwork to finally fulfil promises made to allies eight years ago. But even as the German government is preparing to take this leap forward, NATO has raised the bar even further at its summit in Madrid, in June 2022. Further efforts will be needed if Germany wants to avoid breaking its promises yet again.

When German Chancellor Olaf Scholz proclaimed the *Zeitenwende* in his keynote address to the German Bundestag on the fourth day of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, he stated, with regard to the return of open warfare in Europe, that "the world afterwards is not the world we had before"¹. Upon hearing this, the capitals of Germany's partners, from Warsaw to Washington, expressed relief and joy at Berlin's change of heart. The planners at NATO headquarters and commands in Brussels, Mons, and Brunssum, however, must have been rather surprised by the German reality check. After all, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent covert Russian war in eastern Ukraine, the Alliance had already realised that Russia was once again an opponent to be taken seriously; that collective defence and deterrence had to return to the top of NATO's list of priorities; and that a fundamental military restructuring of the Alliance had become necessary.

Already at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, and at the following summit in Warsaw in 2016, the Alliance had agreed – based on a clear shift in the threat level – that allies must spend two per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence, the intent being specifically to rebuild their capabilities, lost at the end of the Cold War, of maintaining large military units in a high state of readiness, and providing force support and functioning logistics for rapid troop deployments to NATO's eastern flank. At these NATO summits, Germany had also agreed to

restore its national and collective defence capabilities, but until 27 February 2022, it had never mustered the political will to actually keep these promises. With the ambitious plans of the chancellor and the German Federal Government to establish a "powerful, cutting-edge, progressive Bundeswehr"², and a special fund amounting to 100 billion euros negotiated with the opposition, German policymakers seemed finally prepared to make good on commitments made almost a decade earlier.

However, the extensive package of measures is based on a fundamental fallacy: it was not 2022, but 2014, that marked the *Zeitenwende* for European security policy; in setting up the special fund, promising to modernise the Bundeswehr, and refocusing on national and collective defence, Germany would simply be complying with necessary adjustments to its defence policy that have been neglected since 2014. At its most recent summit in Madrid in June, NATO agreed on next steps in reaction to the war in Ukraine, including the most comprehensive reorganisation of its armed forces since the end of the Cold War. This creates new additional requirements regarding contributions of NATO member states. As such, Germany is already lagging one step behind again, despite its *Zeitenwende* security policy announced in February.

Moreover, German policymakers must make further fundamental decisions if their country is to adequately fulfil the central role in NATO its location, size, and economic power dictate. This



The actual *Zeitenwende*: Already after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO decided to increase its collective defence capabilities. However, it took eight years and Russia's attack on the whole of Ukraine for Germany to muster the political will to actually fulfil the commitments made at the time. Source: © Artur Bainozarov, Reuters.

fundamental problem is further exacerbated by the fact that it is already becoming evident that the measures Scholz announced are only being implemented hesitantly, or not at all: Germany is once again in danger of breaking the grandiose promises it has made to NATO. If partner countries' expectations raised by the chancellor's speech were once again to be disappointed, Germany would lose what remains of its international trust and credibility.

Furthermore, it was the United States, with its comprehensive commitment to supporting Ukraine, and its military reassurance of Eastern European NATO partners that was, so far, the decisive element in preventing a Russian victory in Ukraine, and a spillover of the conflict to European neighbours. Without the US, Europe would have come dangerously close to the worst-case scenario: complete occupation of

Ukraine and further Russian attacks on Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and other countries.

But European security policy is facing another *Zeitenwende*, one that has been foreseeable for years: this may well be the last time that Washington expends so many military resources on, and pays so much policy attention to, European security. This is because Washington's strategic focus has long been the Indo-Pacific. The rapid pace of Beijing's military build-up is forcing the US to place increasing strategic focus on balancing Chinese power, which entails a partial military withdrawal from the European theatre.

This leaves an extremely narrow time frame – probably only until the end of the 2020s – in which European allies, first and foremost Germany, can and must prepare to assume responsibility for Europe's conventional defence

themselves. This strategic horizon leaves no time for a sluggish *Zeitenwende* or yet again an incomplete fulfilment of assurances given to NATO. Instead, German policymakers must realise that the measures Scholz announced will not by themselves be sufficient to set the necessary security policy course and return Germany to its position as backbone of Europe's conventional defence.

NATO's Madrid Decisions: More Defence, Greater Burden

The Russian attack on Ukraine served as a catalyst for the shift within NATO, initiated in 2014, back to collective defence and deterrence. Back then, the Alliance had finally, after years of focusing on international crisis management, decided to expand its defence and deterrence capabilities, especially on NATO's eastern flank: from the Baltic States to Eastern Europe to the Black Sea region. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, the NATO summit decisions made in Madrid in June 2022 go far beyond the previous force posture and capability profile of NATO planning, which had already been fundamentally adjusted after 2014. The most recent NATO decisions in Madrid thus establish additional military contribution requirements for member states, especially Germany.

NATO's ability to actually defend against an attack is to be enhanced.

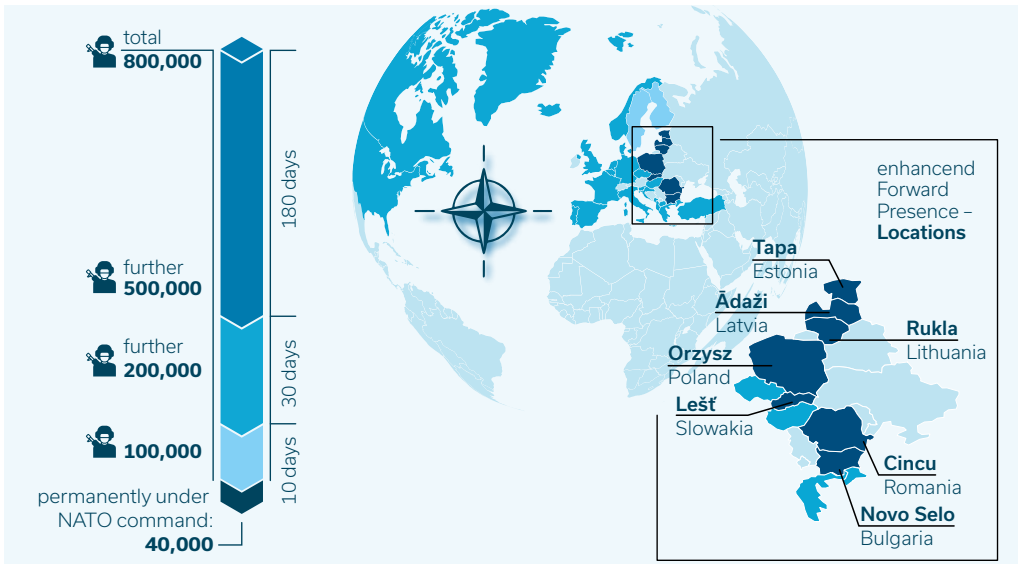
The core of the most recent reform of the allied military force structure is the NATO Force Model (NFM), which conceptually replaces the previous planning structures of the 40,000-strong NATO Response Force (NRF). The most important effect of the NFM is that it greatly increases troop numbers, to a total of 800,000 assigned to NATO. Of these, 100,000 are to be ready to mobilise within ten days, and another 200,000 within 30 days. Gradually, another 500,000 troops are to be added, who must be ready for deployment within 180 days. Additionally, a new structure, the Allied

Reaction Force (ARF), is to be created, merging the previous NATO Spearhead and other quick reaction forces. The 40,000-strong ARF will, in future, be permanently subordinated to NATO's Supreme Allied Commander – a planning milestone marking the first time since the end of the Cold War that the Supreme Allied Commander will have a force of this size to command even prior to the outbreak of a crisis, thereby allowing the swiftest possible response in a developing crisis.³

The NFM represents a conceptual shift in NATO towards deterrence in the form of an enhanced forward defence. After 2014, the Alliance initially focused on a small number of rotationally forward-deployed troops acting as a "tripwire". They would be quickly overrun in the event of attack but would serve as a *casus foederis* according to Article 5, triggering a NATO counter-offensive. The credibility and effectiveness of this concept was already questioned even before the war in Ukraine began. And indeed, NATO no longer considers it to be adequate in the face of the increased threat level. Instead, NATO's ability to actually defend against an attack, and thus its deterrence capability, is to be enhanced with a greater troop presence in potential conflict regions in Eastern Europe, and advance deployment of equipment, materiel, and munition in the "frontline states". To this end, NATO eFP (enhanced forward presence) battlegroups are to be upgraded and, in case of crisis, are to be able to grow into multidomain-capable brigades (units of about 5,000 soldiers each), with rapidly deployable additional allied forces – i.e. large units that can fight in coordination with naval and air forces and other support troops. In addition to the existing four battlegroups in the Baltic States and Poland, the new units, created in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia after the war began, are to form three further permanent battlegroups. In future, large allied units in the rear will also be partly assigned to geographical focus areas in Europe for which they will be responsible in the event of war.⁴

In this way, the Alliance is creating a force structure with considerable troop strength and a high degree of readiness, which could act as an

Fig. 1: New NATO Forces Model: Mobilisation Periods and Troop Strengths



Troop mobilisation in the event of a crisis, including the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), and enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) locations in Eastern European member countries. Sources: NATO 2022, n. 3; Major / Swistek 2022, n. 4; NATO 2022: NATO's Eastern Flank: Stronger Defence and Deterrence, Jun 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/3fSTs7b> [7 Oct 2022].

effective deterrent if it is backed up by adequate commitments from NATO members. Indeed, it places high demands regarding both the quantity and quality of military contributions. In future, Allies must be able to mobilise division-sized units;⁵ this will also impact Germany's tasks within NATO. Up to now, the majority of high-value capabilities⁶ and large-scale units were American; in future, 50 per cent of military contributions are to come from European NATO countries themselves. This means that the pledges made by European NATO member states to Brussels must increase significantly. Under the old force structure after 2014, within the framework of the NRF, Germany had promised about 14,200 troops and 34 aircraft and ships; under the new NFM, from 2025 onwards, Germany must more than double that, to a total of 30,000 troops, 85 aircraft and ships, all of which must be available to NATO within 30 days.⁷

To achieve this force level, Germany will have to accelerate its already ambitious commitment to provide NATO with a mechanised division with three fully equipped combat brigades, bringing it

forward from 2027 to 2025. The 1st Panzer Division, which had been slated for this task, so far has only one large unit fully equipped and ready for action: the 37th Panzergrenadier Brigade, which will be NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) next year. Two other units, the 12th Panzer Brigade and the German portion of the Franco-German Brigade, will require additional personnel and materiel to be fully equipped within three years. Given that, since 2014, Germany has been unable to provide NATO with a single brigade without having to spend years in preparation – for instance, pulling together materiel and equipment from other units – providing two more brigades in the brief period remaining will require a superhuman effort.

Besides this, Germany is serving as the framework nation leading the battlegroup in Lithuania, so it faces the additional challenge of keeping a further brigade for the Baltic States permanently on standby at maximum readiness. The unit will largely remain in Germany, with only parts of the combat troops and staff elements to be stationed directly in Lithuania as a reinforced

battlegroup with forward-deployed command and control (C2) elements. This itself was, in fact, a compromise that Germany has negotiated, since the Bundeswehr would be unable to station a fully equipped brigade in Lithuania at this time. This makes it all the more important for Germany to enable the remaining elements of the 41st Panzergrenadier Brigade as quickly as possible so that in future it can be in continual readiness and can exercise regularly in the area of operations.

NATO's increased demands require a quantum leap in the announced Bundeswehr modernisation.

In other words, and at the very least, Berlin must now make far more extensive contributions to NATO defence planning – and much earlier than had been expected. Just a few months after German policymakers, on 27 February, committed themselves to modernising the German armed forces by making fundamental decisions and dedicating a special fund of 100 billion euros, the measures they envisioned for equipping and strengthening the Bundeswehr have already become insufficient. With the planned expansion of NATO's defence and deterrence capabilities, the bar for a successful *Zeitenwende* in German security policy has been raised even higher.

Room for Improvement in the Planned Bundeswehr Modernisation

NATO's increased demands on the German armed forces require a quantum leap in the announced modernisation of the Bundeswehr within the framework of the special fund. However, a closer look at the planned distribution, and especially the planned spending horizons of the 100 billion reveal significant deficits. At the same time, the special fund certainly provides for quite correct and sensible steps towards enabling Germany to fulfil its required NATO contributions in future.

This includes spending about two billion euros to improve soldiers' personal equipment, as well as investments of more than 20 billion euros into the Bundeswehr's C2 capability. Both of these are important building blocks for restoring the German military's ability to deploy large, fully equipped units to defend NATO's eastern flank. The air force is also receiving a total of more than 40 billion euros, addressing urgently needed procurement projects, such as heavy transport helicopters, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, Eurofighter ECR for electronic warfare, and, of course, the F-35. The navy is receiving almost 20 billion euros for ground-breaking projects, such as the U212 CD submarine, to be jointly developed with Norway, and the new F126 multi-purpose frigate. The special fund thus underpins Germany's promises to NATO, provides for a number of central armament projects, and at long last delivers sufficient funding to air and naval forces for the procurement of urgently needed weapon systems.⁸

Land forces, however, receive a relatively small sum (a little over 16 billion euros). Admittedly, the special fund does provide sufficient funding for important planned modernisation projects for land forces, such as the procurement of a new main battle tank for the armoured forces, and a new wheeled infantry fighting vehicle for medium-heavy forces. Nevertheless, the fact that land forces received the smallest share is worrisome, because in order to provide the urgently needed large-scale units – and thus the backbone of NATO's conventional defence in north-eastern Europe – with a division starting in 2025 and another starting in 2027, it is Germany's land forces which are particularly important. In this area in particular, the Madrid summit decisions have greatly increased the demands on Germany.

For instance, the fully-equipped, cold-start-capable, large-scale army units that Germany promised NATO, which are tasked with independently conducting combined arms warfare, require a large number of support forces, but so far these forces do not exist at all. Above all, there is a lack of long-range wheeled artillery to support mechanised infantry with indirect fire, and mobile air



defence to protect armoured units from threats from the air. Both of these are critical capabilities for warfare, as recent experience in the war in Ukraine has shown. Although the Bundeswehr must completely re-procure all of its anti-aircraft defence and wheeled artillery for its medium-weight forces, both items are barely included in the special fund thus far. Quick planning, tendering, and delivery of the necessary systems must be a top priority if Germany is to fulfil the more comprehensive requirements of NATO's Madrid decisions.⁹

Currently, Germany's air force could run out of munitions on just the second day of fighting in a symmetrical war.

The Bundeswehr also has a second severe deficit, which relates to munitions stockpiling, similarly not taken into account in the special fund. Beyond major modernisation projects, the Bundeswehr's greatest weaknesses continue to be its ammunition and spare parts stockpiles, which have thinned out over the decades. The Bundeswehr's inventories are currently so short that in a high-intensity war against a symmetrical opponent, some branches of the armed forces, such as the Luftwaffe, would run out of munitions on just the second day of fighting. Although the Chief of Defence, General Eberhard Zorn, put the necessary investments for munitions and spare parts at about 20 billion euros in the run-up to the special fund negotiations, these items were not included in that fund; instead, they are to be covered in future by the regular defence budget. This puts the urgently needed replenishment of Bundeswehr munitions and spare parts stockpiles in danger of being cut during future budget negotiations,

further impairing the viability of the German armed forces.¹⁰

Significant Deficiencies in the Implementation of the Special Fund

In addition to the planning gaps in the special fund, the greatest threat to the fulfilment of Germany's commitments to NATO lies in the sluggish implementation and expenditure of the special fund. The cumbersome and inefficient military procurement system remains a bottleneck for accelerated Bundeswehr modernisation. In order to fulfil Germany's extensive obligations to NATO, some of which have deadlines that have been moved up, procurement projects would have to be set in motion at a correspondingly vigorous pace. But the fact that in 2022 not a single cent of the special fund will be spent, and that current budget planning provides for less than a tenth of available funds (just 8.5 billion euros) to be spent in 2023 shows that policymakers will not succeed with regards to swift procurement in the foreseeable future. Whether the military contributions to NATO, to be fulfilled by 2025, will indeed occur is thus more than questionable. The target of two per cent of GDP for defence spending that Chancellor Scholz personally committed himself to is not likely to be achieved until 2024, and possibly even later.¹¹

The reasons for the Bundeswehr's bureaucratic procurement process are partly due to the complicated legal framework, which has already been addressed with the passing of a law to accelerate procurement procedures. However, there are also structural reasons as to why the Bundeswehr is using the special fund in bits and pieces, and far too slowly. Germany's Federal Office of Bundeswehr Equipment, Information Technology and In-Service Support (BAAINBw), which is responsible for procurement, cannot keep up with awarding procurement contracts to industry, and needs to be reorganised in order to ensure more efficient outflow from the special fund. In addition, the BAAINBw also has about 1,300 unfilled posts, accounting for about eleven per cent of its personnel, which helps

← Left out in the cold? Although it has to bear the brunt of the pledges Germany made to NATO at the Madrid summit, the Army's share of the 100 billion special fund for the Bundeswehr is comparatively small. Source: © Johannes Eisele, Reuters.

explain the sluggishness with which the agency is transacting the increased volume of orders. Additional personnel is urgently needed.¹²

German policymakers have to explain that peace and stability must be defended even with military force when necessary.

Finally, there is also insufficient practical implementation of joint European armament projects. An example of this problem is the German-French-Spanish project for developing a future combat air system (FCAS), comprising especially a next-generation fighter aircraft – a project that Scholz mentioned in his 27 February address. FCAS is currently so gridlocked because of infighting among the companies involved over exchange of sensitive technologies that many observers no longer rule out the project's complete failure. It is here that German policymakers, and above all the German chancellor, should be called upon to assume a degree of responsibility not only for the announcement, but also for the successful implementation and full execution of these ground-breaking joint armament projects to secure European technological superiority for decades to come.

Beyond 100 Billion Euros: A Cultural *Zeitenwende* Is Needed

In order for Germany to fulfil its obligations to NATO, a reworking of the implementation and design of the special fund is required, as are fundamental shifts in German security policy, as well as a strategic repositioning of Germany itself. The *Zeitenwende* must therefore not limit itself to financial and procurement policy aspects of Bundeswehr modernisation; it must be more comprehensive and sustainable. In addition to the shift in equipment, this should also entail a shift in personnel policy for the German military – and, crucially, a fundamental rethinking of security policy, a shift in strategic culture, and closer meshing of military, politics, and society.

Despite the deficits in the special fund and in its implementation, the Bundeswehr can expect significant improvements in its material readiness over the next few years. However, the German government's package of measures does nothing to correct the glaring personnel shortage with which Germany's armed forces have struggled for years. The basic situation – that Germany's armed forces have 20,000 positions unfilled across the board – has changed little, as personnel numbers have been stagnant for years. Moreover, the Bundeswehr is heading for a demographic dropout at the end of the decade, when baby boomers retire from service and cannot be replaced by the significantly lower numbers of school graduates. Nevertheless, the German government remains critical of the concept of a mandatory social service year; support comes primarily from Christian Democratic circles.

In any event, obliging young people to Bundeswehr (or, alternatively, other types of) service would do little to fill positions that require well-trained specialists. Nonetheless, a social service year could be a catalyst for larger portions of future generations to come into contact with the Bundeswehr and discover a new professional arena. Experience prior to the suspension of compulsory military service has shown that this service had led to larger numbers of young people signing up for longer terms as regular or professional soldiers in the Bundeswehr building on the experiences they had gained during their year of service. This is the Bundeswehr's chance to change the trend in personnel numbers – the social service year could also contribute to attracting the specialists that the German armed forces so desperately need. Moreover, mandatory service could grow Germany's reserve, which, given Germany's increased NATO commitments, must be deeply integrated into active units so that it can perform security duty in the rear of large units when these are deployed in potential conflict areas.

A social service year could also form the nucleus of efforts to achieve closer interlinkages between the Bundeswehr and German society at large, as well as aid in the establishment of a strategic

culture. After years of the German public being alienated from security policy realities, there is now a need for a broad engagement of society with the armed forces, and with defence policy issues. This engagement must be guided by a political leadership that tells the public uncomfortable truths and clears away the culture of extreme military restraint. German policy-makers must explain, in their communication efforts, that the global threat level has massively increased due to burgeoning great power rivalries; that peace, stability, and the international order are being challenged by autocratic systems, and must be defended; that this defence cannot only take the form of de-escalation and diplomacy, but occasionally also of military force, when needed. A strategic culture must therefore perceive deterrence and defence as fundamental political tasks, which is the *raison d'être* of armed forces in democratic states. Only if this awareness catches on can Germany's *Zeitenwende* succeed in the long term.

Russia's war against Ukraine, and the subsequent restructuring of NATO, require German policy-makers to take a large leap forward in matters of security and defence policy. The special fund and the measures initiated to modernise the Bundeswehr are just the first step. Although Germany is finally fulfilling its pledges of 2014 with the projects announced on 27 February – the bar has risen anew, with the increased demands on European NATO members, above all Germany, to enhance defence and deterrence since the NATO reorganisation of June 2022. This situation requires improvements to the special fund, as well as to its sluggish implementation, including a *Zeitenwende* in terms of personnel and culture. Only in this way will it be possible to set the necessary course in security policy and to do justice to Germany's role as the backbone of conventional defence on NATO's eastern flank.

- translated from German -

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- 2 Ibid.
- 3 NATO 2022: New NATO Force Model, in: <https://bit.ly/3d2yfGR> [28 Sep 2022].
- 4 Major, Claudia / Swistek, Göran 2022: Die Nato nach dem Gipfel von Madrid, SWP-Aktuell 2022/A 49, 28 Jul 2022, in: <https://bit.ly/3ddYE4h> [12 Sep 2022].
- 5 For comparison: the divisions of the Bundeswehr currently comprise between 14,500 and 19,000 soldiers.
- 6 These are mainly high-tech or complex military capabilities, such as (satellite) reconnaissance, cyber capabilities, air-to-air refueling, heavy airlift, air and missile defence, operating strategic bombers, nuclear-powered attack submarines or aircraft carriers, and (long-range) precision munitions, which first and foremost the United States possesses in sufficient quantities or has substantial experience with.
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