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The *Zeitenwende* at Work: Germany's National Security Strategy

Karl-Heinz Kamp

In spring 2023, about 15 months after the start of the Russia–Ukraine war and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's proclamation of Germany's *Zeitenwende* (turning point), Germany presented its first National Security Strategy (NSS). It is a remarkably clear document by German standards. Gone are German hesitancy and the pro-Russian tones of the past.

The development of the NSS paralleled the evolution of German security policy during the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, from Germany's embarrassingly parsimonious offer to supply 5,000 helmets before the outbreak of war to its current status as the second-largest supplier – after the United States – of military and civilian support to Ukraine. The NSS reflects the fact that the *Zeitenwende* has already taken place in the minds of German policymakers and the German people, and signals that Germany's NATO allies can hope for a militarily stronger and politically more realistic Germany in the future.

From chore to mission

'We will present a comprehensive National Security Strategy in the first year of the new federal government.'¹ This short, bland sentence, buried at the back of the German government's November 2021 coalition agreement, was supposed to lead to the most thorough German security-policy reassessment in years, if not decades. In the German system of government, a coalition agreement is a declaration of intent for a joint government programme.

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Some of its elements can concern core issues of the parties involved, while others can merely voice vague intentions haphazardly agreed. The NSS initially seemed to fall into the latter category for the new federal government of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals, because neither the Social Democrats nor the Greens had hard security or the military in their political DNA. The Social Democrats had always seen themselves as a party of disarmament and detente, and supported Germany's political closeness with Russia, as did Angela Merkel with her continuous support for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The Greens had emerged from the peace movement and were long considered pacifist and anti-nuclear. A governing coalition that included these two parties hardly seemed likely to forge a serious security strategy.

Even in key ministries – especially the Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of Defence – the project generated only limited enthusiasm. Many a ministry official sighed at the mention of 'another strategy', envisaging countless rounds of discussions and departmental consultations that would yield a strategy paper weighed and smoothed to innocuousness, destined to disappear into desk drawers.

Accordingly, the process of strategy development began in a non-committal manner at the beginning of February 2022, when the Foreign Office presented a one-page paper with so-called 'key points' that were very general and full of platitudes. The strategy was supposed to identify 'opportunities and risks', to be based on the 'comprehensive concept of security' and to describe the security environment in a 'balanced' way. Not a word was said about Russia's obvious preparations for war or about Europe's increasingly systemic rivalry with China. The paper did, however, prompt agreement on a permanent working group under the leadership of the Foreign Office, to which all ministries concerned would send representatives.

Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 interrupted the strategy-deliberation process, which had been rather calm until then. The entire government initially fell into a state of shock. However, with Scholz's speech on the *Zeitenwende* three days later, it became clear that Germany's security policy would have to change fundamentally. For too long, Germans, even across party lines and under diverse government coalitions, had clung to outdated basic convictions. Eastern European concerns about Russia

were all too often dismissed as paranoid, and China was seen above all as a profitable trading partner. Cheap Russian oil and gas promised economic advantages, and the weakness of the German armed forces was accepted by consensus because Germany seemed surrounded by friends. Instead of building up national defence, governments preferred, with broad political blessing, to invest in social welfare. The prevailing view was that close economic ties and 'modernisation partnerships' with Russia would make military conflicts impossible anyway.

These shibboleths were now up for discussion, and a new security strategy would be the proper framework for replacing them. Formulating it quickly morphed from compulsory exercise to critical mission. The government established an ambitious work programme in March 2022. The process was divided into a consultation phase through September 2022 and a subsequent writing phase. The consultations were to be conducted both nationally, including experts and the public, and internationally with important allies. In terms of content, the plan was to proceed in three steps: firstly, the interests and goals of German policy would be defined; secondly, the threats impeding these goals would be arrayed; and thirdly, the measures for achieving long-term goals and interests would be determined. By the end of the year, a paper of no more than 50 pages was to be completed and agreed. In mid-December 2022, the NSS was to be published as the German government's capstone security document, from which strategies on China or space policy, for example, would be derived.²

Germans had clung to outdated convictions

On 18 March 2022, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock officially launched the process of formulating the NSS at a public event, announcing a series of workshops and discussions. At the same time, the individual ministries delineated the goals and key points they wanted considered. For the Ministry of Defence, it was crucial that defence policy and thus the Bundeswehr play a central role in the security strategy. Combat-capable armed forces had to be created to ensure the defence of Germany and its allies. This required, among other things, sufficient funding. Consequently,

there was a strong desire to explicitly mention NATO member states' commitment to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence, and beyond that to incorporate into the strategy Germany's intention to do so in the future.

The process

This was the first time since the Cold War that a German government had focused so sharply on its strategic role. The consultation phase crucially included not only Germany's closest allies in NATO, such as the United States, France and the United Kingdom, and fellow European Union members, but also countries like Israel. The aim was both to inform them about Germany's plans and to understand what expectations they had of Germany as the largest economy in the EU. In addition, German officials wanted to learn from the experiences these partners had in arriving at their own security strategies and what they believed should be taken into account.

The United States, for example, pointed out that usually only one or two headline messages of a government document stuck in the public mind, while the rest were lost in the usual news overload. These core messages should be clear from the outset and worked out during the development of the strategy through a kind of reverse engineering. In substance, Washington wanted, among other things, a visible departure from the Russia-tilting policy of the past and a clear German strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. France advised that the process should be as broad as possible in terms of consultation and registered its interest in being closely involved in the debates. Paris also wanted clarification of the German position on arms exports and a firmer German commitment to European strategic sovereignty. As expected, London's counsel cut in the opposite direction: Germany should reduce its economic dependencies without indulging in dreams of an autonomous or sovereign EU. Also, UK interlocutors suggested that while the positions of experts, elected officials and the public should be considered from the bottom up, a decision should be made top-down as to what the NSS should ultimately include.

There was some concern, particularly in the Ministry of Defence, that a strategy developed primarily in the Foreign Ministry would not sufficiently address the painful issues of hard security, the role of the military or the

costs of a credible defence. These issues had not been high on the agenda of past German foreign ministers. Frank-Walter Steinmeier's call, during his term as foreign minister, for NATO not to rattle its sabre after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea was still a bad memory.

A real strategy

Against this background of inconsistent advice, the first draft of the NSS, presented internally in October 2022, was surprisingly decisive and robust for a German policy document. The authors of the internal working group first defined the values and interests of German foreign and security policy. In addition to protecting the territorial integrity of Germany and its allies, these included, for example, interests in free-trade routes and a secure supply of raw materials and energy. If this sounds unremarkable, note that in 2010, German president Horst Köhler had to resign because he made similar points in a public speech. Threats and challenges ranged from an aggressive Russia, obvious given its war on Ukraine, to the systemic rivalry with China, state fragility in the Global South and the climate crisis – also noteworthy statements, since impugning Russia and China had always been avoided in the past. Finally, the document described the concepts and instruments of German security policy, including national and alliance defence, disaster management, crisis prevention, arms-export policy and arms control. Overall, the document offered remarkable clarity on the immediate threat from Russia and those from China, international terrorism and climate change. One official involved in the strategy process said, half-admiringly and half-jokingly, that this first draft could have been written by graduates of the Command and Staff College of the Bundeswehr.

The draft was still too long and repetitive. It also had gaps. This was not unexpected, since it involved such sensitive and controversial issues as the financing of the armed forces, the future position on German arms exports and the possible creation of a National Security Council. Despite intense media interest in the NSS, hardly anything from the working group's deliberations was leaked to the public and the respective draft texts remained closely held. The allies too maintained confidentiality, despite anxieties. For Washington, the strategy would remain empty if the willingness to spend more on defence

were not enshrined in writing. London had just begun to revise its own security strategy – the so-called ‘Integrated Review’, which now looked grandiose in light of Brexit-related disappointments – and was eager to coordinate with a Germany equipped with a clear strategy of its own.

Not surprisingly, the initial timeline could not be kept, but by the end of January 2023, several rounds of discussion at ministerial level had resolved most of the open questions and controversial formulations. Only a few major points of contention remained: the 2% target for defence spending, the requirement that spending on development aid should always increase proportionately to defence spending, and the question of whether a National Security Council should be established. After eight draft texts, the latter two issues were defused through indefinite postponement.³ But the Ministry of Defence’s wish to anchor the 2% commitment in the strategy was granted, though softened by the proviso that it be applied on the basis of a multiyear average. In mid-March 2023, a polished document was submitted for final consultation with all federal ministries. In May 2023, the final document was published. Although it took five months longer to forge than originally planned, the result was satisfying.

The protection of Germany and its allies tops of the list of security-policy interests. Next comes strengthening EU and NATO partnerships, as well as bilateral ones with France and the United States. Russia is seen as an imminent threat, and the West’s rivalry with China is considered a major challenge. The Bundeswehr is clearly positioned as the core security-policy instrument for countering threats, and the guarantor of Germany’s deterrence and defence capabilities. Germany asserts greater leadership responsibility with respect to NATO’s external borders and casts itself as the central geostrategic hub for NATO and the EU in case of conflict. In line with the explicit enshrinement of the 2% target, the NSS stipulates that the armed forces will have significantly increased financial needs. Even on the topic of German arms exports – an acutely sensitive issue in the past – the strategy notes that while restraint should continue to be exercised, arms exports will also be used as a security-policy instrument vis-à-vis partners and as a means of securing the country’s own defence industry.⁴

* * *

Fifteen months after Scholz announced the *Zeitenwende*, a completely overhauled German security policy and strategic approach have been established in a federal planning document. Over this period, German society has experienced a corresponding change in mindset. There is a sound bipartisan consensus in the German parliament on supporting Ukraine for as long as necessary, and even on the left and right political fringes seasoned politicians are characterising Russia as an imminent danger. While Germany may be legally bound not to deliver weapons to areas of tension, the government was willing to send *Leopard* tanks to Ukraine during an outright war. Strikingly, the once-pacifist Greens were the strongest supporters of that decision. The German public still backs harsh sanctions against Russia, despite their painful economic consequences for Germans.⁵ There is even a majority in favour of the presence of American nuclear weapons on German soil⁶ – something that had not materialised in the previous four decades. Not least, the NSS was agreed in a relatively smooth fashion by a diverse coalition government willing to allow once-vehement norms – such as raising the development-aid budget in proportion to the defence budget – to go unvoiced. This consensus is testament to a durable political transformation in Germany. The *Zeitenwende* is likely to be sustainable, and Germans unlikely to fall back into the lax security-policy stereotypes of the past.

Notes

- 1 For useful context, see Bastian Giegerich, Fabian Hoffman and Ben Schreer, 'Germany's Coalition Government Offers a Taste of Its Defence Ambitions', Online Analysis, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 29 November 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis//2021/11/germanys-coalition-government-offers-a-taste-of-its-defence-ambitions>.
- 2 See Federal Foreign Office, 'Towards the National Security Strategy – the Process', 26 July 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/nationale-sicherheitsstrategie>.
- 3 See Hans von der Burchard, 'Germany Ditches US-style National Security Council to Relieve Political Deadlock', *Politico*, 18 February 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-coalition-spat-national-security-council-olaf-scholz/>.
- 4 See, for example, John Michaud, 'Worth the Wait?', *American–German*

- Institute, 29 March 2023, <https://aicgs.org/2023/03/worth-the-wait/>.
- ⁵ See, for example, Sabine Kinkartz, 'Germans' Support for Russia Sanctions Steady – Can It Last?', DW, 7 August 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germans-support-for-russia-sanctions-remains-steady-but-can-it-last/a-62408344?maca=en-rss-en-all-1573-rdf>.
- ⁶ Infratest Dimap, 'US Nuclear Bombs in Germany: 52 Percent for Stay, 39 Percent for Withdrawal', June 2022, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/umfragen/aktuell/us-atombomben-in-deutschland-52-prozent-fuer-verbleib-39-prozent-fuer-abzug/>. See also Moritz Kütt, 'Germany's Nuclear Weapons Policy and the War: Money for Nukes, Words for Disarmament', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 27 October 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/10/germanys-nuclear-weapons-policy-and-the-war-money-for-nukes-words-for-disarmament/>.