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## Germany and the Ukraine war Zeitenwende with the brakes on



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*More than most Western European countries, Germany appears especially affected by the Ukraine war. Faced with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Germany finds itself in a state of geopolitical shock. Its foreign and security policy, built upon such principles as 'militärische Zurückhaltung', 'Wandel durch Handel' and a conciliatory 'Ostpolitik' towards Moscow, is outdated and unfit for the strategic challenges of the 2020s. Under great internal and external pressure, Germany is undergoing a process of soul searching over the direction of its foreign and security policy, the so-called 'Zeitenwende'. But the outcome is by no means certain. However, even if the watershed in Germany's foreign and security policy does not meet initial expectations, the shifts could be substantial and likely to have profound implications for the EU and the Netherlands.*

### A geopolitical European Union

On 29 August, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a [speech](#) at Charles University in Prague, in which he outlined his vision for a geopolitical European Union. In his speech – seen by many as Germany's belated response to Macron's Sorbonne speech in 2017 – Scholz made an articulate case for a stronger, more sovereign and more *weltpolitikfähigen* Europe. He argued for enlargement of the European Union, a gradual transition towards majority voting in foreign policy and other policy areas (such as tax policy), and the rapid reduction of one-sided (economic) dependencies. On defence, Scholz advocated for an independent council of EU defence ministers, stressed the importance of having an

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operational rapid deployment force by 2025 (in accordance with the EU's Strategic Compass), and called for a European air defence system. Scholz's speech comes at the back of a geopolitical awakening in Germany in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## Germany's Zeitenwende

Germany's post-war foreign policy has been built on two pillars: European unification, based on a close partnership with France; and Germany's *Westbindung* in the Western transatlantic alliance with the United States and within NATO. Economically, however, Germany has taken a different path, which at times has put it at odds with its European and transatlantic partners. Guided by the notion of *Wandel durch Handel* – the assumption that non-democratic, post-communist states would eventually transform themselves into liberal middle-class democracies under the influence of rules-based international trade – Germany sought close economic and energy relations with Russia and China.

According to the German economist [Hans Werner Sinn](#), this ambivalent geo-economic policy put the Germans in a rather precarious position in 2022:

*'We, Germans, have delegated our energy supply to the Russians, entrusted our security to the USA and our growth to the Chinese. Were we particularly enterprising or particularly stupid?'* (Quote translated from German)

Sinn's comment accurately captures the dilemma facing Germany, and why a major *Zeitenwende* was inevitable. Previously, former Chancellor Merkel's pragmatic stance (which treated trade first and foremost as an economic issue, rather than a geopolitical one) had already come under increasing scrutiny when the Russian invasion of Ukraine placed Germany's Russia policy in a negative light. The social democratic SPD, in particular, faced heavy criticism for its (previously) warm ties with Moscow. A peculiar case is former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who is considered a

Putin-*versteh*er and was stripped of some of the privileges normally given to former chancellors. Federal President (and former Foreign Minister) Frank Walter Steinmeier (SPD), long an advocate of a conciliatory approach towards Russia, recently [admitted to mistakes](#) over his government's Russia policy, conceding that Germany should have listened better to the warnings of its eastern European neighbours.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also, and crucially, led Berlin to question its culture of military restraint. The turnaround is symbolised by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's now famous [Zeitenwende speech](#) in the Bundestag on 27 February. In this speech, he said farewell to 'pacifist Germany', to the Germany that – albeit for historically understandable reasons – was reluctant to fully fund its defence needs. In his speech, Scholz outlined the principles that were to guide German foreign and defence policy in this new 'era'. Germany would supply Ukraine with weapons, increase its defence capabilities and fulfil its obligations towards NATO allies. Furthermore, Germany's Russia policy would undergo dramatic changes with the implementation of a wide range of sanctions on its former 'partner' and a reduction of dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

Scholz announced an additional 100 billion euros in German defence spending and a commitment to (more rapidly) achieving the NATO spending target of 2% of GDP, in order to eliminate all the backlogs in the German *Bundeswehr*. The Chancellor promised to make the Bundeswehr ready to deter any Russian adventurism.

Subsequently, Scholz, in an article in the [FAZ](#), and later in his speech at Charles University in Prague, called on Europe to become a geopolitical player, and to strengthen and intensify cooperation in foreign affairs – among other things by abolishing the national veto. In doing so, he sought to connect to French thinking on a geopolitically and strategically autonomous Europe, no longer endlessly divided but capable of acting amid the new *Great Power Competition* of the 21st century.

## Internal debate: Zeitenwende light?

In the aftermath of Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, it quickly became clear that Germany would not change its diplomatic inclinations overnight. In the early days of the war in Ukraine, Germany's (military) commitments to Ukraine were modest – especially in comparison to the contributions from, say, its US, British, Polish and Baltic partners, Berlin remained hesitant to send any heavy weaponry, and Scholz continued to push for a dialogue with Putin. Germany was dragging its feet and many commentators questioned its commitment to Ukraine. What did not help were the rhetorical spats back and forth between German politicians and the then Ukrainian ambassador Andrij Melnyk, Scholz's decision to hold off on [visiting Kiev](#), and his general lack of visibility and communication during this watershed moment. His Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock (Greens), and Economy Minister, Robert Habeck (Greens), quickly outshone him internationally, due in no small part to better communication.

According to [Hennig Hoff](#), of the German Council on Foreign Relations, the Scholz government continued to prefer to err on the side of caution and stay in 'peace mode' rather than switch to 'war mode'. Scholz himself maintained that his prudence was informed by a concern about possible escalation between NATO and Russia, and the intention to avoid an [Alleingang](#) – opting to first consult with partners before deciding on sending any (heavy) weapons.

Wolfgang Ischinger, former chairman of the Munich Security Council, wrote in [Foreign Affairs](#): *'Behind the German misgivings about greater involvement in Ukraine are a number of security concerns. The most obvious is the risk of military [escalation](#) by Russia, including the use of nuclear and chemical [weapons](#). "No NATO involvement" has become a popular mantra in Berlin as well as among other Western countries supporting Ukraine. Understandably, the last thing Scholz wishes is to be remembered as the post-Cold War*

*chancellor who drove Germany into a direct military confrontation with Russia.'*

Scholz's somewhat ambiguous and wavering policy reflects the internal divisions in Germany. In comparison to many other European countries, there has been a particularly fierce debate in Germany about the appropriate policy towards Ukraine and Russia. Groups of intellectuals and commentators have expressed themselves in public letters and manifestos, with [some](#) – such as Wolfgang Merkel, Alice Schwarzer and Juli Zeh – calling on Scholz to carefully consider the risks of sending heavy weapons and to not let Germany become a party in the war, and [others](#) – such as Ralf Fücks Daniel Kelhmann and Tanja Börzell – calling instead for a much more assertive policy with the aim of strengthening Ukraine's defence capabilities and weakening Russia's warfighting capability.

The larger public, too, seems to be divided. At the [end of April](#), Germans were equally split on the question of whether Germany should send heavy weaponry to Ukraine: 45% in favour vs 45% against. Meanwhile, according to a [survey](#) conducted in May, 63% of Germans were concerned that Germany would be drawn into a war with Russia. Yet only a minority – albeit a significant one – of 38% of respondents felt that Germany should act with caution in offering support to Ukraine to ensure that it would not be attacked itself. The majority of respondents, 55%, said that Germany should assist Ukraine.

According to [Jeremy Cliffe](#) of the *New Statesman*, the Ukraine war exposed some significant rifts in German society: *'Russia's war in Ukraine has challenged many of the German establishment's policy assumptions, but, more than that, it has exposed conflicts in the country's basic identity – east or west, 'Mittellage' or 'Westbindung', rational or romantic – that are still not settled. There is some evidence that younger Germans, those who have grown up since the wall fell, are more firmly Western in outlook than older generations. Polling shows they are more likely to back a more "responsible" Germany (a fairly reliable proxy for the Westbindung) over "restraint" (the language of the Mittellage).'*

Despite the ambiguity in Germany's Ukraine policy – providing (military) support to Ukraine, but with the brakes on – the watershed changes in Germany's foreign and security policy as a result of the war should not be underestimated. On the military front, Berlin did ultimately decide to send some [heavy weaponry](#) – such as Gepard anti-aircraft systems and Panzerhaubitze 2000 – and is currently sending more. In reaction to the recent air strikes on several Ukrainian cities, the German government also moved up the delivery of (part of) the promised [Iris-T SLM air defence systems](#). Meanwhile, the *Bundestag* has approved a [€100 billion special fund](#) for comprehensive investments in the Federal Armed Forces. On the energy front, Berlin denied the certification of the Nord Stream 2-pipeline and is quickly reducing its energy reliance on Russia – with drastic immediate consequences for Germany's energy supplies. Finally, the war in Ukraine has seemingly even affected Germany's China strategy, with Foreign Minister [Annalena Baerbock](#) committed to reducing Germany's economic dependence on China – so as not to be as vulnerable again to economic blackmail.

### The consequences for the EU and the Netherlands

Even if the proclaimed radical transformation of Germany's foreign and security policy does not meet initial expectations, the changes should not be underestimated, and the German *Zeitenwende* could have serious implications for the EU. Not only is the war in Ukraine likely to lead, in time, to a more geopolitically aware and militarily capable Germany, the *Zeitenwende* also adds both to the momentum of Europe's strategic autonomy agenda and to the strengthening of transatlantic relations. After all, the Ukraine war has also reanimated '[brain-dead NATO](#)' and led to a careful post-Trump '[return of Western Unity](#)'.

This also raises important questions for the Netherlands, such as: How does the Dutch government respond to German (and French) calls for increased defence cooperation and integration?

Will the Netherlands take a leading role in this, or will it be more reluctant? Will the Netherlands wholeheartedly support Chancellor Scholz in abandoning unanimity voting in favour of European Council majority voting? How can the Netherlands contribute to a more interventionist trade and industrial policy that a reduction of economic dependencies would entail? And how can the Netherlands play a substantial role in keeping EU and NATO in the best possible balance?






Perhaps most importantly, the Netherlands must ask itself how it positions itself towards Germany's *Zeitenwende*. The question remains how fast and radically Germany will abandon its conciliatory foreign policy and post-war pacifist strategic culture in favour of a more assertive one. The Netherlands would, however, certainly benefit from Germany taking on more (military) responsibility on the global stage. As one of Germany's closest European partners, the Netherlands has an important role to play in siding with Berlin in embracing the necessary change. It can do so in three important ways:

1. First of all, The Hague should consider formulating its own response to Scholz's Charles University speech. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown that the EU, too, is in desperate need of a *Zeitenwende*. In his speech, Scholz underlined the need for a geopolitical and strategically autonomous European Union. It is important that his appeal receives a response and that the Dutch government plays an active role in co-shaping the discussion on a geopolitical Union.
2. Second, the Dutch government could help Berlin embed its 'defence policy shift' within NATO and in a European context by continuing to deepen its military and defence cooperation with Germany. The two partners already work closely together in the military and defence domain, with, for instance, a joint tank battalion and close coordination on weapons supplies to Ukraine.
3. Third, in light of Germany's drastic efforts to reduce its (economic and energy) dependence on Russia, the Dutch government could support its partner by offering Germany a guarantee of energy solidarity in the coming winter.

### About the Clingendael Institute

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