

Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction
in an Age of Global Contestation

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First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-032-91271-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-91272-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-56230-6 (ebk)

Chapter 6

Germany's Vision for International Order in the Era of *Zeitenwende*

No More Kantian Dreams?

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003562306-8

Open Access was funded by the Finnish National Defence University; European Union's Horizon Europe coordination and support action 101079069 – EUVIP – HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ACCESS–03; Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation part of research carried out at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (US-SARANA); Nordic Africa Institute; Tampere University Library.



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

6 Germany's Vision for International Order in the Era of *Zeitenwende*

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Introduction

Germany's post-Cold War ordering visions have traditionally been embedded in a strong ideational-normative framework. This framework envisions an ideal-typical international system, in which war has largely become redundant due to the strength of the Western liberal international order, its principal institutions and multilateralism. International and intergovernmental organisations such as the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN) are the custodians of this system, in which the law of the powerful has been replaced by the power of international law. However, the outbreak of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine in February 2022 has challenged these visions to the extent that Germany is now going through what Chancellor Scholz has aptly coined a *Zeitenwende* – an epochal change in the post-Cold War European security order.

This has not only meant the de facto end of the post-Cold War era of “peace dividends” in Europe, but it has also challenged and partly undermined the hitherto German foreign and security policies based on the aforementioned ideational-normative framework. Subsequently, this has led to a rethinking and re-evaluation of German policies, what kind of an actor Germany aspires to be and what the international system and European and global security order should look like, given these new realities exemplified by the incremental degradation of the Western liberal international order. By examining the official German strategy documents released during *Zeitenwende*, this contribution delves into the potential rearrangement and reimagining of this ordering vision from a normative, institutional, distributional and temporal perspective.

Zeitenwende as a Strategic Challenge

In the land of poets and thinkers, nothing creates as much debate as a good buzzword. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's famous *Zeitenwende* speech on 27 February 2022 in the German Bundestag, a few days after the Russian attack on Ukraine, did just that. Not only did Scholz proclaim that Germany was now living through a “watershed era”, but he also proclaimed that “[t]he issue at the heart of this is whether power is allowed to prevail over the law. Whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to

the nineteenth century and the age of the great powers” (The Federal Government 2022). Hence, Russian aggression was not only in direct violation of international law and the principles that upheld it, but it also represented a view diametrically opposed to Germany’s vision for world order. This is why *Zeitenwende* has become not only a political catchword and the word of the year 2022 in Germany, but its meaning and impact also go beyond political rhetoric and touches the essence of how Germany seeks to make sense of the country’s direction and its place in the world.

Indeed, *Zeitenwende* can be felt across different policy domains (e.g. energy, trade and economics), but perhaps it finds its strongest expression in German security and defence policy. Up until Russia’s war of aggression, defence policy, in particular, has been somewhat of a sideshow in German politics and something that has rarely piqued the interest of the bulk of the German population. As a result, defence issues have rarely featured prominently in the Bundestag elections. This has had to do with a restrictive German strategic culture, often labelled as a “culture of restraint”, which ties back to Germany’s self-image as a “civilian power”. This image has determined much of not only how Germany conducted itself particularly in the immediate post-Cold War period in the international arena but also how it was perceived by its partners and allies, many of whom either levied criticism towards this stance or garnered hope that Germany would change its course (cf. Giegerich and Terhalle 2020; Maull 2006; Harnisch and Maull 2001).

While German strategic culture underwent significant changes in particular during the Balkan wars and the war in Kosovo in the 1990s, it was the Bundeswehr’s long deployment as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan (2001–2014) that really brought war home to Germany in the form of German casualties and the stories of suffering among the soldier families. However, the German political elite did not succeed in linking the ISAF operation to something resembling a strategic narrative, which would have clearly tied the public concern regarding the military to the purposes for which the armed forces were being used. Rather, Germany’s strategic vision for the operation crystallised in the then Defence Minister Struck’s famous words, “Germany is being defended at the Hindukusch” (The Federal Government 2004), which certainly did not resonate well with the German public. A more nuanced strategic deliberation would have been crucial in integrating the public into the security and defence policy debate, but because of the stickiness of German strategic culture, this did not materialise. German soldiers participating in the operation were often referred to as “well-diggers” instead of actual soldiers. It was only after an incident in Kunduz in September 2009 – where a US missile strike against two stolen oil tankers requested by a German commander killed over 90 civilians – that some of the leading German politicians at the time began referring to Afghanistan as a theatre of war (cf. Hilpert 2014; Noetzel 2011).

Zeitenwende has turned the tables in many respects. Its spirit is embedded in every notable strategy paper the Federal government has produced since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and is actively being referred to in political speech and public discourse. Therefore, *Zeitenwende* can also be assessed through the effort of

the German government to formulate a forward-looking strategic narrative of sorts, which is a novelty in German security-political discourse, that has all too often only looked to the past. After Scholz's famous speech, Germany has attempted to enact *Zeitenwende* in different ways. The German government first used it to refer to its plans to boost defence spending, and later to changes to other policies like its rules on exporting weapons to conflict areas, announced in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Zeitenwende* can also be felt in the German way to address many of the issues and challenges that the liberal international order is facing at present.

In its security- and defence-political dimension, *Zeitenwende* refers not only to the current and ongoing geopolitical upheaval in international relations but also to Germany's long-pending realisation that a security dimension exists in different strands of policies previously conceived of in Germany primarily in other than security- or defence-related terms. This pertains in particular to Germany's lopsided energy trade with Russia and its security-political repercussions. After the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 and the initial confusion and shock it unleashed, Germany was quick to reverse this dependence and seek alternative sources for energy supply. Therefore, *Zeitenwende* can be seen as providing the impetus for reimagining a post-2022 world order in an era of geopolitical turbulence, while setting up certain political and strategic puzzles for Germany to solve in terms of its place, role and tasks in that order. In short, it is the latest (and strongest) in a series of wake-up calls for Germany from its post-Cold War Kantian slumber.

In the following, I will assess some of the key strategy documents that have been published since the declaration of *Zeitenwende* to analyse whether and to what degree the ideational framework with regard to Germany's vision for the world has been reconstructed and reimagined. These include the first-ever German National Security Strategy (NSS) (June 2023), China Strategy (July) 2023, and The Defence Political Guidelines (DPG) (November 2023). The assessment of these ordering visions is based on the analytical framework laid out in the introduction of this volume (distributional, normative, institutional and temporal perspectives; see Chapter 1).

Germany's Ordering Visions per the German NSS, China Strategy and DPG

Arguably, the politically most important of the aforementioned documents is the German NSS. Not only was it the first time Germany drafted a strategic document of this strategic magnitude and depth, but it was also devised to function as a cover document of sorts (*Dachdokument*) for other subsequent strategies and related documents (BMVg 2023a). The drafting of an NSS was already agreed upon in the coalition agreement between the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party [SPD]), the Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party [FDP]) and the Greens, but Russia's war of aggression gave the process a special impetus and a sense of urgency with regard to both German national security and defence as well as Germany's role in NATO's collective defence.

In the Federal government's own language, the NSS is intended to "function as a spring-board" for future strategic deliberation (The Federal Government 2023a). In this sense, the NSS expresses the overall German strategic sentiment on security issues, embedding and providing a context for other, issue-specific strategies to be tackled in the future. Germany's China Strategy ties in with the substance of the NSS, but China's changing role in the world necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of not only Germany's bilateral China policy but also that of the EU and the policies for multilateral cooperation with China in a separate document. The DPG, in turn, reinforces the security and defence political dimension laid out in the NSS and tackle the challenges that Germany's armed forces are facing in the era of *Zeitenwende*. Together, these documents build a rather comprehensive picture of current German strategic thinking and, therefore, visions for the world order and Germany's place in it.

The Normative Dimension – the First Pillar of German Grand Strategy

The normative aspect has been at the heart of Germany's foreign and security policies in the post-Cold War era and has therefore been strongly represented in Germany's visions for the world order. This is based on a normative framework developed after World War II, culminating in the so-called never again (*nie wieder*) principles that continue to inform German policymaking. These include (1) war should never again emanate from German soil, (2) Germany should never again act alone and (3) genocide should never again take place on European soil (cf. Seppo 2021). These normative considerations have formed much of the essence of Germany's strategic approach to international affairs in the post-Cold War era, which aimed at bolstering the liberal international order and renewing its structures when deemed necessary (e.g. reforms in the UN).

Strong normative reflections appear in many of the challenges described in the strategy documents. For instance, as climate change is considered "humanity's central task in this century", there is a strong normative inclination in Germany's approach to it, since it most severely affects "[w]omen, children and vulnerable population groups". This requires cooperation at the regional and international levels to "protect our natural resources, which also creates opportunities for engaging in intergovernmental confidence-building and conflict prevention" (The Federal Government 2023b, 65). The normative aspect is likewise strongly present in the vision for a nuclear-free world, and according to the NSS, "the prerequisites for disarmament steps must be created, particularly in the framework of Non-Proliferation Treaty, but also with the signatories to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons". Normative aspects also continue to substantially drive future targets for specific policies, such as German development policy or arms export policy. Moreover, a special emphasis is put on cultural relations and education, as well as science diplomacy, which "drive forward our exchange with the world on values and interests" (The Federal Government 2023b, 30).

Central to Germany's current vision for a more secure world is an "integrated" approach to security, which has a strong normative bearing on policies pursued. This entails three dimensions of security: it does not only mean "freedom from war and violence", but it also means the "freedom to shape our lives, our democracy, our economy, the way we want". At the international level, "we are committed to an order governed by rules and the law, not power or despotism" and "security in the 21st century also means protecting the natural resources on which all life depends (climate change)" (The Federal Government 2023b, preamble). The idea behind the integrated security approach is to "promote an ongoing process of interaction between all state levels, the business sector and society, thus further developing the strategic culture in Germany" along with a focus on "bringing together all issues and instruments that are relevant to protecting ourselves from external threats" (The Federal Government 2023b, 17, 30). This also considerably affects the way Germany sees its own role in the current era:

Where governments undermine security and the rule of law, we will focus our cooperation to a greater extent on non-state actors, the local level and multilateral approaches. At the same time, we will strengthen those partner governments that, like us, are committed to upholding the international order based on international law.

(The Federal Government 2023b, 14)

Hence, from a normative angle, achieving integrated security can succeed only in close cooperation with Germany's partners and allies, who share the same value-based orientation and who are willing to defend it. However, it is also considered important to seek cooperation "with states that have a sincere interest in maintaining the international order, even though they do not share our values" (BMVg 2023b, 15).

Normative considerations pertain also especially to Germany's stance on international crisis management, where the combination of different policy tools in the civilian-military sphere are essential. The quest for more effective tools will be reinforced in the context of the integrated security approach that will aim at a more strategic approach in the guidelines for crisis prevention, conflict management and peacebuilding: "With our values serving as a guiding principle, we will base decisions on our international crisis engagement on strategic interests" (The Federal Government 2023b, 41). Another area where normative deliberations are considerably present is the realm of international law, where a specific accent is put on the adherence to international criminal law and the international responsibility to protect. According to the NSS – as these are both affected by experiences during the past two decades and in view of the current challenges presented by Russia's war of aggression – international criminal law is to be developed and strengthened further. This includes the Federal government's aim to reform the Rome Statute in order to "expand the jurisdiction of the ICC to include the crime of aggression and align its jurisdiction for the other three core crimes" (The Federal Government 2023b, 52).

Hence, from a normative standpoint, the German vision for world order displays perhaps the least amount of change, and, if anything, the era of *Zeitenwende* reinforces both the normative aspects of German policymaking and the envisioning of an egalitarian international order, which is visible in the clear accents put on feminist foreign policies and civil and human rights in the NSS and Strategy on China (The Federal Government 2023c). From a normative angle, relations with China are considered very problematic. China is seen to constantly undermine civil and human rights (which Germany regards as universal) not only in its immediate sphere of influence (Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan) but also in its dealings with third parties (e.g. in Africa). This is deemed an obstacle not easily overcome in Germany's bilateral relations with China, as well as in EU–China cooperation. However, Germany also recognises that as it “nevertheless aims to engage in close and wide-ranging cooperation with China”, it does so “in recognition of the fact that none of the major global problems cannot be solved without China” (The Federal Government 2023c, 20). This pertains especially to combating climate change but involves other areas of political cooperation in economic and military spheres as well, such as free access to markets, sustainable development and disarmament. In this respect, Germany's stance towards China reflects those of the United Kingdom in acknowledging that it might be necessary to work with partners who do not necessarily share Western values and perspectives (see Chapter 7).

The Institutional Dimension – the Second Pillar of German Grand Strategy

In addition to its strong normative foundation, Germany's vision for world order is also embedded in a focused strategic-institutional bias, which is the other core aspect of German grand strategy. The NSS itself is markedly transatlantic in nature, and in the German strategic documents, there are many affirmations of the necessity and preservation of a functioning transatlantic partnership. Multilateralism is at the core of Germany's vision for world order, and despite the need for expanding Germany's partnerships beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, its main institutions continue to play a vital role – a similarity with France (see Chapter 5).

NATO's role and indispensability are highlighted both in the NSS and in the DPG, not only for German national security but also for the entire transatlantic area. Cooperation between NATO and the EU is seen as crucial, especially in terms of strengthening the European pillar of the transatlantic community and to develop Europe's ability to act on its own. One of the focal points of these documents in particular is the elevated role for the Bundeswehr. The aim is to “further expand [German] military presence in Allied territory . . . and place this presence on a more permanent basis, also so that Germany can function as a framework nation for our allies” (The Federal Government 2023b, 33). This is already taking place as Germany is sending a panzer brigade to Lithuania, to be stationed there on a permanent basis for the time being. The presence of *Zeitenwende* is strongly felt in the current plans for the Bundeswehr, as this deployment is considered to be strategically “new terrain” (*strategisches Neuland*) for Germany (Die Bundeswehr 2024). The overall

ambitious aim, according to the NSS and DPG, is to “make the Bundeswehr one of the most effective conventional armed forces in Europe in the coming years, one that is able to respond and act rapidly at all times” and “achieve success in high-intensity combat” (The Federal Government 2023b, 33; BMVg 2023b, 9).

Germany sees the EU as the core institutional actor that needs to have the ability to act globally and use its influence to shape the rules-based international order. The overall aim is to “further develop the European Union in a way that enables it to preserve its security and independence effectively for future generations in the face of external challenges” (The Federal Government 2023b, 37). While not delving deep into the threat that extremist and populist movements pose to democracy in the Euro-Atlantic area, the NSS maintains that “our strength also derives from the stability of our democracies”. Moreover, it posits that Germany aims to strengthen the Common Foreign and Security Policy and resolutely carry out the Strategic Compass projects. The EU and its institutions are considered vital in preventing war and Germany’s goal remains “a Europe united in peace and freedom and open to all European countries who share our values” (The Federal Government 2023b). The reconciliatory process with France is, once again, highlighted as one of the major successes in European integration towards peace and the importance of France is elevated above Germany’s other European relations in the NSS.

In terms of EU enlargement, the NSS states that “the Federal Government supports enlarging the European Union to include the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as Ukraine, Moldova and, at a later stage, Georgia” (The Federal Government 2023b, 39). Germany stands to benefit economically from EU enlargement. Moreover, further enlargement is seen as important in terms of strengthening the geopolitical profile of the EU, while also reinforcing the EU’s energy security. Given the geopolitical challenges and the need for EU internal reforms, the next round of enlargement remains, particularly with regard to Ukraine, temporally undetermined yet a strategic goal for Germany. The German President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has argued that EU membership will remain a “merit-based process” but that “completing our Union” is a historic and priority task for the EU (European Commission 2024). This reflects Chancellor Scholz’s views: “To secure Europe’s place in the world of tomorrow, the EU must change. We need a geopolitical EU, an enlarged and reformed EU, and an EU open to the future” (The Federal Government 2023d).

Other European institutional organisations that play a major part in Germany’s vision are the Council of Europe (CoE), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and European Political Community (EPC). CoE’s role in laying the foundations for peaceful coexistence on the basis of shared principles is valued, as is its role in monitoring adherence to them. OSCE as a multilateral platform is seen as particularly important in promoting the German concept of integrated security and the EPC’s role as an informal forum for discussions on peaceful cooperation in Europe “sends a clear message against the return of imperialism to Europe”. The G7 format is also merited with being an effective multilateral forum for Germany to further its interests (The Federal Government 2023b, 39).

In German strategic contemplation, the United Nations will continue to function as the bedrock of future international order and its climate process (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), in particular, remains absolutely essential for progress on global climate protection. While recognising that a deadlock in the UN Security Council “impedes peace and security”, Germany supports efforts in revitalising the UN and actively promotes discussions on peace and security issues at the UN General Assembly in the spirit of “Uniting for Peace” (The Federal Government 2023b, 41, 67). Germany also views China functioning in a self-serving manner in the UN and not participating in the work of the UN in accordance with the UN Charter and China’s political weight (The Federal Government 2023c, 54).

The main international organisations, in particular NATO, EU and the UN will remain vital for Germany’s vision for world order to materialise, because they represent platforms where Germany can most effectively distribute and channel its ideas, values and interests in a multilateral fashion. Organisations such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will feature more prominently in German policymaking in the future. Others, while indispensable and important, are viewed to be in need of major reforms (notably the UN and the World Trade Organization).

The Distributional Dimension – Emerging Centres of Power and Systemic Rivalry

In spite of a strong normative-institutional undercurrent in Germany’s approach to world affairs, *Zeitenwende* also infuses German reflections on world order with a poignant dose of realism. In German strategic thinking, Russia has been demoted from a partner to a rival (short of “enemy”) and is considered “the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area”, while China is considered both a “partner, competitor and systemic rival” (The Federal Government 2023b, 12). This links with Germany’s vision on the distributional aspect of international order mostly in power-related terms. The fundamental strategic narrative that can be construed based on the documents focuses on the challenge of rising centres of power vis-à-vis the liberal international order and what this means for Germany as a custodian of that order. While Germany certainly still envisions that normative world order is superior to a unipolar or bipolar world, there is a clear acknowledgement that this order needs bolstering and active support, which require more agency from Germany (see Chapter 4 on EU).

In terms of stability in the international system, the most pressing issue is related to the war in Ukraine presenting a fundamental challenge to European security order, while, in parallel, the global order is seen to be changing with “new centres of power emerging”. The challenge is seen in the attempt to commit to an order governed by rules and law, which is “anything but easy in a world marked by rising systemic rivalry” (The Federal Government 2023b, 7). Hence, the dynamic between increasing multipolarity and systemic rivalry is considered the main factor that is reshaping the international order in terms of the distribution of power. Here, the increasing enmity and worsening of relations between the United States and China is considered especially worrisome (The Federal Government 2023c, 48).

The deliberations on the distribution of power in the international system apply also to international economic and financial relations, which are “ever more informed by considerations of power and influence” (The Federal Government 2023b, 24). Hence, the distributional perspective pertains also specifically to boosting economic and financial resilience and raw materials security. This is because the German economy is anchored in the European single market and founded on rules-based access to markets, raw materials and technology that have come under threat. Therefore, “there must be a focus on reducing critical dependencies in strategically relevant sectors in order to maintain and expand our capability to act in a global context without impairing Germany’s economic openness and innovative capacity” (The Federal Government 2023b, 53–54). Due to the changing global markets driven by digital and ecological transformation as well as geopolitical tensions – and the fact that accessibility to many raw materials and commodities is no longer a given – the aim must therefore be to also “provide targeted support for raw materials projects in cooperation with business and set up strategic reserves” (The Federal Government 2023b).

This also ties to the so-called *Energiewende*, meaning turning away from the use of fossil fuels. However, Germany will remain an importer of energy for the foreseeable future and “is therefore pursuing the goal of carbon-free energy supply that is also safe and affordable”. To this end, it is prioritising technological innovation, diversification of supply sources and the procurement of strategically important raw material from reliable partners wherever possible. The Federal government recognises, however, that

reducing dependencies can only succeed in cooperation with a large number of reliable partners and allies . . . cooperation projects with global partners are designed to benefit both sides and are a decisive step to prevent the formation of blocs.

(The Federal Government 2023b)

In terms of trade in general, Germany wants to be more effective “in tapping the strategic potential of European Union trade agreements for German and European security and resilience as well as for the prosperity of the nations involved”, which is why Germany “supports an ambitious EU trade agenda and single market” (The Federal Government 2023b, 55). Overall, security awareness is very present in the German reflections on international economy and trade. This refers not only to the aforementioned issues and to strengthening the industrial base of European security and defence but also to protecting key technologies at the national and European levels. This goes especially for harmonising military capability requirements with Germany’s allies and partners and in terms of procurement: “It [the Federal government] will focus primarily on European solutions if this can be achieved without losing capabilities. Rapidly bridging capability gaps remains the crucial criterion” (The Federal Government 2023b, 38).

The distributional aspect is also closely tied to the German view on growing asymmetries between Germany and China, which are the results of the Chinese

government “impeding access to civil society, the media, research institutions and governmental agencies” (The Federal Government 2023c, 20). Therefore, Germany is engaging in “de-risking” measures, which are primarily channelled through the EU and its policy mechanisms (EU’s weapons embargo to China, trade policy tools such as the EU Anti-Coercion instrument and the Regulation on Foreign Subsidies distorting the Internal Market) as well as German state export guarantees to German companies to combat the critical dependencies arising from the fact that “the further China moves away from the norms and rules of the rules-based international order, the more critical dependencies on the Chinese market . . . can prove to be a problem” (The Federal Government 2023c, 38). Germany is also very aware of Chinese global policies and their impact on German and European polities and economies and Euro-Atlantic security. Here, the Chinese global policy initiatives are seen to run counter to Germany’s visions for a fair and egalitarian world order. Germany aims to closely monitor Chinese efforts in implementing its Global Security Initiative, which would “reshape the global security discourse, and bring it in line with Chinese concepts of global order” (The Federal Government 2023c, 54). Preserving German political and economic interests is considered especially vital in the Indo-Pacific region, as “the shape the international order will take is being determined to a greater extent in this region”, and Germany is willing to underscore its commitment to preserving the rules-based international order through temporary military presence in the region – for instance in the form of naval patrols (The Federal Government 2023c, 50).

The Temporal Dimension

Finally, if we analyse temporal aspects of Germany’s vision for world order in terms of continuity and change, the ideational structure of German strategic thinking seems to have remained mostly intact. If one compares the NSS to the White Book of 2016 (BMVg 2016), for instance, there is a clear continuity in terms of envisioning the systemic challenges that the liberal international order will be facing, despite the sensation of *Zeitenwende* currently adding to the seeming urgency towards change. The systemic challenges that Germany is facing now are the same – the difference being that their impact is more strongly felt and recognised. Germany is still clinging to its true and tested grand strategy of multilateral engagement with a strong institutional bias that relies upon bolstering the foundational pillars of the liberal international order with certain shifts in the focus of different policies, most notably in the area of security and defence. Here Germany has become acutely aware of the hybrid nature of many of the new threats to its security as well as security vulnerabilities caused by lopsided dependencies in economy and trade. This extends beyond Germany’s energy dependence on Russia and its dependence on China for certain unprocessed raw materials and preliminary products, as the integrated security approach suggests.

In terms of interpretations of the German past, the usual references to Germany’s historical responsibility and its shame in unleashing World War II are still present in current German strategic thinking, but it would be wrong to argue that

they would be as prevalent as they were during the 1990s in German strategic culture, which, if the NSS is to be taken seriously, is only now beginning to properly emerge. However, observers of German politics would do well to remember the rather non-linear development of German strategic culture in the past 30 years. *Zeitenwende* is a challenge to be tackled and enacted upon to be sure, but according to German Foreign Ministry official involved in the drafting of the German NSS, “while some of our policies are changing, we Germans will remain who we are, whether you like it or not” (Seppo 2023). This speaks to a strong continuity in the normative-institutional aspects in German strategic thinking. Strategic cultural change takes place, but that does not occur overnight.

Conclusion – Is Germany Dreaming With One Eye Open?

In sum, *Zeitenwende* has necessitated gradual shifts in terms of German multilateralism (e.g. partnership-seeking at different levels) and focal points for specific policies (increased security awareness), but mostly, a normative approach embedded in the rule of law, freedom, democratic values and respect for human rights and their promotion via international institutions such as the UN, NATO and the EU continues to shape German grand-strategic thinking. This approach is well established in the German political class and administrative bodies, and there is no indication it will be amended in any significant manner. The stickiness of this approach notwithstanding, Germany does not view itself primarily in terms of a civilian power anymore – the whole concept is completely absent in all of the strategy documents. Naturally, these documents do not exhaust the scope of German security and defence policy discourse as a whole, but the absence is telling. Perhaps the most significant change on the ideational level concerns the envisioned, elevated role for Bundeswehr in the collective defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, and the shock which was unleashed by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and Germany's response to it would give credence to the argument that Germany is not in a deep Kantian slumber anymore: “It [the Bundeswehr] must be warfighting-capable in all areas . . . The benchmark for this is the Bundeswehr's readiness to fight at any time. This is the only way that deterrence can be credible and peace guaranteed” (BMVg 2023b, 9).

However, there are growing concerns that the implementation of *Zeitenwende* has mostly failed because of Chancellor Scholz's “multipolarity strategy of continuity” (Tallis 2024), which has not been a sound strategy in a changed world. This is more or less visible in all of the different dimensions analysed in this chapter. First, Germany has failed to live up to its vision of a secure and free Europe by not politically committing itself clearly to Ukraine's victory against Russia, and this has undermined its strong normative claims. Second, Germany's relations towards both democratic allies and autocratic adversaries have been ambiguous at best, and Germany has only begrudgingly assumed leadership in matters important to its allies (security and defence), while simultaneously not always being a reliable team player. Third, the emphasis Scholz puts on continuity challenges the claim that Germany has finally learned to “do strategy”.

Finally, the domestic-political turmoil in Germany after the collapse of the German government and the dissolution of the Bundestag in November 2024 does not make the implementation of these visions any easier. The formation of the next Federal government will be extremely difficult because of the results of the German elections – while Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian Democratic Union [CDU]/Christian Social Union [CSU]) was the clear winner with approximately 29 per cent of the votes, Germany’s far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany [AfD]) also got its best result ever in the federal elections (21 per cent). The governing parties (SPD, the Greens and the FDP) all suffered a bitter defeat. The dislike Germans feel towards yet another “grand coalition” between the SPD and the CDU/CSU is a factor, but the reality is that the next German government will most likely be formed between these parties since CDU/CSU has categorically declined federal-level cooperation with the AfD. What will this mean in terms of Germany’s ordering visions?

The new chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU/CSU) has described the causes of the war in Ukraine as *Epochenbruch* (“epochal change”) that goes somewhat beyond Scholz’s formulation of *Zeitenwende*. In terms of the ordering visions discussed in this chapter, this entails an even clearer focus on Europe and its responsibility for prosperity and security in the era of Trumpism and a deepening of Germany’s bilateral relations with France and especially Poland. Merz also proclaimed that Germany needs to win back the trust it has lost during the Scholz era, which would increase Europe’s capacity to act. Merz envisioned a refurbished security strategy during the first year of office which would project the idea that “strength deters aggressors while weakness invites them”. For Merz, a strategy should be more than a description of aims – it should transform Germany “from a sleeping to a middle-sized power with real influence” (CDU/CSU 2025). This vision, however, is not a novelty and harkens back to the debate on “new German foreign policy” of the early and mid-2010s during the Merkel era.

In the new geopolitical era, characterised by Trump’s strongman policy over Ukraine and Europe and the weakening of the transatlantic relations, Germany would need to muster stronger political leadership in Europe as well as more strategic determination and political will to carry out its envisioned ambitious agenda. As a result of the dominance of uncertainty in transatlantic relations currently, Merz has already signalled a willingness to discuss nuclear deterrence with France and United Kingdom in terms of nuclear sharing or at least nuclear security in Europe. This could imply a new strategic course for Germany.

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