

DGAP COMMENTARY

Your Turn, Berlin: A German Strategy for Europe



Josef Janning
Senior Associate Fellow

The *Zeitenwende* has made Europe's status quo impossible to maintain. Although the imperative of transforming the EU into a geopolitical actor is widely understood, the direction of new policy to achieve that goal is unclear. Europe is not moving so Germany must move Europe. As detailed here, German policymakers must spell out the Europe they want and act to make it a reality, working to overcome disagreement and against resistance from those who prefer to wait things out.

Today, the most responsive and productive milieu that Germany has enjoyed in modern history is at risk. The European countries in the EU and NATO are confronted with serious external and internal threats to their integrity and unity. At present, the dangers of the failure and disintegration of this union and alliance may be higher than at any time since the early years of the Cold War. Back then, Germany reveled in a political, economic, and cultural return to prosperity, democratic stability, and political power under the protection of others. Now, Germany will have to invest its resources to protect and enhance the environment that was so beneficial to it.

German political leaders seem to understand the challenge. The *Zeitenwende* first spoken of by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in a speech days after Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 calls for setting up a defense fund of 100 billion euros. As part of this sea change, Scholz advocates for the development of a common air defense system and the creation of a European headquarters for the EU's planned Rapid Reaction Force in 2025. He has also suggested to establish a Council of Defense Ministers, to introduce more majority voting, to reform the European Commission while keeping all member states represented, and to alter the composition of the European Parliament, as well as a number of other policy changes in economic and fiscal areas, migration and asylum, and industrial policy.

Yet what Chancellor Scholz has not proposed are the ways and means of implementing those changes in policy and institutions. Therefore, the scope of Germany's response to the *Zeitenwende* has not been adequate. Indeed, Scholz has spoken out against the avantgarde options for reform that he initially introduced, such as an increased majority

voting. In a speech in Prague in August 2022 he stated: “I do not want an EU of exclusive clubs or directorates.” He said his suggestions should be seen as “food for thought.” Scholz argued for an EU in which all member states were equal. If, together, they should reach the conclusion that treaty change is necessary to move Europe forward, then treaty change should be pursued.¹

In essence, Chancellor Scholz favors a stronger EU if everyone agrees. Germany, it seems, does not want to lead the EU by initiative but rather by consensus. Providing good advice from the sidelines, however, hardly meets the challenge of the *Zeitenwende*. A strategic response to our geopolitical times would entail thoroughly rethinking Germany's foreign policy and its strategy for the EU and NATO. A European capacity to act to meet this challenge will not emerge spontaneously; rather, it will have to be created through a conscious, substantial effort and against resistance from those in Europe who prefer to wait things out. German policymakers will have to spell out the Europe they want (even when not everyone agrees) and act accordingly. If Germany were to assume the role of a continental UK – committed to European security but with ad hoc engagement based primarily on national sovereignty – the German political elite must consider the impact of this on the country's neighbors and EU integration. However, if they want a stronger Germany to be firmly embedded in integration structures, German policymakers will have to plan out and build a stronger European Union.

THE CHALLENGE

The international order is undergoing profound change. There is no new status quo; instead, flux is shaping many

aspects of political life at home and abroad. Because we are focused on events, our view of the world has not kept up with structural change. Yet one of these events, Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, suddenly made us aware of the gap between perception and reality. We woke up “in a new world” as Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock put it.

Germany, it seems, does not want to lead the EU by initiative but rather by consensus

The characterization of this event as a watershed moment in history (*Zeitenwende*) was an initial response to that recognition – one that appeared to change policy in many countries in Europe and the West. Yet we still seem to believe in the chance to go back a decade or two, or that things might not become as bad as they could. We have not thought through what the *Zeitenwende* really means for Europe, European integration, and the Western/European alliance system.

The international order of the past decades is eroding. The reemergence of great power politics has called the authority of its institutions with their web of legal norms and agreements into question. Rivaling powers engaging in fluid and circumstantial alliances push aside norms and institutions.

Geopolitical concepts, the notion of great power privileges, and the aggressive use of military means are beginning to shape the relations between states.

Alliances have been weakened because some members have clearly put their own interests above alliance norms and obligations. Even within NATO and the EU, there are member states acting against the spirit and mission of these institutions. Middle powers in various parts of the world are using the global power struggle to further their own power interests and benefits to the detriment of others.

Most European institutions draw their strength from the consensus among their membership. Precisely that source of strength has now become the Achilles' heel of European politics: Lack of consensus equals stagnation when change is called for. Consensus at an institutional level has eroded because it has also eroded within the democracies of the West. Diffuse public support has given way to growing discontent and a loss of authority of elites in many of our societies. In turn, elites shy away from taking initiative and considering major change. These developments have affected foreign policy, which has often become more short-term, more national, and more zero-sum. As a result, common institutions and policies have been weakened. Although Europeans have collectively taken unprecedented decisions to defend their interests, their response remains tied to the specific situation in Ukraine – as if a defeat of Russia in Ukraine would bring back the “old world.”

Europeans now need to fundamentally rethink the way in which they devise and operate their cooperation and integration. This should begin with

1 The Press and Information Office of the German Federal Government, “Reden zur Zeitenwende, Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz” [Speeches on the *Zeitenwende*, Chancellor Olaf Scholz], October 2022: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975292/2138164/1dd57df3a594489f4c23bdbb7ad3efdc/bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-reden-zur-zeitenwende-2-auft-download-bpa-data.pdf?download=1>.

recognizing that Europeans need to become able to protect and defend their territorial integrity, prosperity, and way of life by their own means and against all possible threats, internal and external. Europeans have long sensed that necessity but preferred not to act upon it decisively. Now, they can no longer afford this ambivalence – not only for Europe’s own sake but also for the sake of the transatlantic relationship. In all probability, the United States will remain Europe’s most important ally. However, because the strategic priorities of US foreign policy will point elsewhere, the quality of that relationship will be based on Europe’s ability to defend itself from now on. The outcome of the 2024 US Presidential Elections will confirm this regardless of who wins the White House.

The Achilles’ heel of European politics: Lack of consensus equals stagnation when change is called for

Thus, Europeans must make up their minds. European policymakers face the choice between responding to the challenge a) nationally or b) by integrating more deeply. Option A would likely result in a wide range of responses that are open to procrastina-

tion or free riding. Aid to Ukraine is a case in point – despite the intense coordination efforts and a remarkable level of consensus overall. Border security and migration is another example of coordinated national responses not resolving the issue. Option B would imply reforming the EU and NATO to allow for a unitary response and a genuinely common policy. Currently, their organizational frameworks are incapable of assuming that common responsibility. After all, protecting Europe in our times will raise a scope of policy decisions that many member states would never contemplate for themselves because of their lack of size and resources.

While Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine captures a lot of strategic attention, this war by no means represents the only risk to the integrity of Europe. NATO/EU territory could itself become an object of Russia’s neo-imperial quest; if so, it would be the first time in the history of both organizations that a member state in Europe faced a direct military attack from outside. Furthermore, European countries could come under threat from (non)conventional long-range missiles from elsewhere in the wider neighborhood. Europe’s economic security, now and in the future, relies on imports of energy and raw materials, trade, market access, and the security of flows. Technological innovation continues to challenge Europe’s economic model, raising questions of industrial policy, technological ownership, or market organization that need to be answered on the European level. Increasingly, economic interdependence is in danger of becoming weaponized for geopolitical purposes or as part of power political rivalries, adversely affecting the security and prosperity of Europe. Though Europe would benefit from an inflow of talented and motivated peo-

ple, the size and origins of existing migration into the continent – and its impact on domestic stability – have given it strategic proportions.

All these issues need policy responses. Not in any orderly sequence, but often at once and without advance warning. Europe’s political model does not seem fit for that purpose.

THE RESPONSE

For Europe to be the answer to the question of how to best deal with the implications of the *Zeitenwende*, the European Union needs to become a strategic actor – or, as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has called it, a geopolitical actor.² As such, the EU and its member states would need to develop the capacity to act upon all dimensions of the challenge laid out above.

A strategic Europe would build and maintain a military force that was strong enough to protect its territorial integrity, economic base, and freedom of choice; able to deter any aggression from outside by whatever means; and establish respective decision-making procedures and command structures.

Such a Europe would seek to pool its foreign policy resources – its soft, hard, and bargaining powers – as best it could to protect its interests. It would seek to secure its citizens and territories from within, unify its immigration and asylum policies, and maintain security at its borders.

As a geopolitical actor, Europe would have to define its territorial scope and set limits to membership accordingly. Upholding the principle of a Union of European Democracies, membership would remain open to those countries

² Starting from her first speech on November 27, 2019, in which she referred to her college as the “geopolitical Commission,” Von der Leyen has consistently put the EU in a geopolitical context. See: “Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme”: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6408.

able but currently unwilling to join (like the UK or Norway). A strategic Europe would make efforts to speed up the integration of the Western Balkans, the most critical enclave in the current EU. It would be ready to accept Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia at some point in time, which would then define the territorial finalité of European integration.

To become more effective, such a union would also want to pool other policy areas. These should include energy policy, a single market for military goods, a unified capital market, and a common tax base to replace member state contributions.

The legal base and institutional set-up of this union would have to be adapted to the content of policy reforms. For the EU to be a strategic actor, the full allegiance of member states to the norms and values of the union – even more so than today – is indispensable. This requires European constitutional jurisdiction over member states.

Such an EU needs a clear-cut allocation of powers and effective institutions and rules for decision-making. Current unanimity requirements cannot be sustained in a strategic union. The suspension of membership rights or the termination of membership will have to be considered to ensure compliance.

Thus, building Europe into a fully-fledged strategic actor requires a major reform of the current treaties – one that needs to be negotiated, agreed upon, and ratified by all member states. Such a process would also need to include changes to member state constitutions that consider all respective processes, super-qualified majorities, and/or referenda.

Clearly, the highest hurdle faced by the perspective of a strategic Europe is politics – generating the political will and determination to implement

change. A grand design like the one outlined above cannot succeed without being driven by a grand coalition of European states, among them Germany, France, Poland, and the other large members. It would fail without the full commitment of additional members from the north, east, and south of Europe. Even a strategic consensus and mission of Germany and France, the two member states made indispensable by their factual veto position, would not suffice. Paris and Berlin might be able to trigger the process, but getting a new treaty ratified will be beyond both their powers.

German practice actually represents the state of today's Europe more accurately than Germany's integration rhetoric does

Maybe not in all aspects sketched out above, but in terms of trajectory and destination, the notion of a strategic Europe corresponds to the classic German vision of the end state of European integration. This vision is still referred to on festive occasions, and it can be found in election platforms and even coalition agreements. In real terms of everyday German EU policy, however, it has given way to sober pragmatism, small steps, the protection of short-term German interests, and a reluctance to lead. Looking at

the current situation, German practice actually represents the state of today's Europe more accurately than Germany's integration rhetoric does.

The goal of turning the European Union into a strategic actor may be desirable or even necessary, but, realistically, it is unachievable. Europe at large lacks the strategic consensus, and the EU's most capable actors – France and Germany – lack the will, power, and followership to make it happen. This grand design for Europe could live as a vision of some distant future as long as it wasn't needed. Now that it is, it proves to be dead but not yet buried. Its death knells are Russian imperialism, American uncertainties, and the return of great power politics.

GERMANY'S STRATEGIC MOMENT

The status quo is impossible to maintain and achieving the Plan A of a grand design is unattainable. Consequently, Germany's foreign policy strategy cannot simply continue in the vein of the past 20 years and practice muddling through as a virtue. The imperative of change is understood, but the direction of a new policy remains unclear. As Europe is not moving, Germany must move Europe – but in which direction when the dream option of deep integration in the EU is lost? The German mantra maintains that Europe cannot be allowed to fail. But it could fail and disintegrate if no way forward is found. This path will not emerge from European Council sessions or be discovered in the Berlaymont headquarters of the European Commission but stem from member state initiative. Drafting Plan B is Germany's strategic moment.

Thus far, European integration has been so rewarding for Germany that its elite prefers not to think beyond the EU's traditional concept. Yet the time has come to define a new approach.

Germany's leaders could choose between two paths – each difficult, uncertain, and possibly even embarrassing to a policy elite that fears resentment. They are: Core Europe or Multi-Track Europe.

Core Europe

When Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers launched their concept of “Core Europe” (*Kerneuropa*)³ two months into the German Council Presidency in 1994, their main motive was to allow for deeper integration in the face of growing internal heterogeneity. Like many policy experts, they were convinced that European integration needed to move forward to “more Europe” or else it would risk falling apart.⁴ When thinking about Core Europe now, political fragmentation and disintegration remain key issues. Its principal drivers, however, are the external vulnerability of Europe and evident threats to its integrity.

Today, a core concept would employ the defense of Europe as its central variable. Core group participants would agree to fully integrate their defense forces – or at least their territorial defense. Accordingly, they would also undertake follow-up steps, creating a single foreign and security policy, a unified decision-making process on the defensive use of military force, a unified military command, and a threat-related deployment structure. Such a defense union would need a common budget and common procurement, both of which call for a single market for military goods to be established among participating countries. As the scope of that ambition reaches well beyond the limits of variable geometry (an approach that gives member states the flexibility to choose different speeds toward integration), the initiative would require a separate treaty. Because this

treaty would establish a union within the EU, it could also take up other issues of deeper integration. While some duplication of structures and institutions would be unavoidable, the core group could also act as an enabler in the wider circle. It could drive the process in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). It could also improve decision-making within NATO as its members would always take a common position and pool their vote. In principle, the concept can be seen as a two-speed-union. Though not very likely, more, if not all, member states could join the defense union over time, allowing for its eventual integration into the EU.

Such a Core Europe concept would make little sense without Germany – and France – wanting to be part of it. Rather, these two nations would have to launch the initiative based on a strategic consensus between Paris and Berlin that has yet to be found. The lack of joint strategic thinking across the Rhine would be the principal stumbling block to such an initiative, as it would also be to the deeper integration needed in Plan A.

Having to choose between joining an inner circle defined by France and Germany or relying on the multi-level coordination of foreign policy, security, and defense within NATO and EU would be a tough decision for the other European states. In former stages of European integration, the participation of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxemburg would have been likely. Italy would have wanted to be part of it, and possibly Spain too. Nowadays, that might only be safely said for Luxemburg. Many other countries in the north and east of Europe are sure to agree with the underlying analysis

but may be reluctant to join because they trust neither Germany nor France enough to merge their defenses with them. Their participation would, however, be essential to stabilizing and securing the eastern flank.

Without others participating, Paris and Berlin would have to go it alone together – and would need to demonstrate their determination in the process to convince others. A Franco-German Union would raise concerns in Europe. It could create feelings of resentment or fears of a *Sonderweg* (“special path”) at the cost of Europe's smaller nations. It may trigger counter-balancing tactics and could fuel the already rising centrifugal forces within the EU. On the other hand, such fears might lead other European actors to overcome their reluctance and engage in favor of deeper integration. In either case, the Core Europe concept depends on the early commitment of others in the center, north, and east of Europe.

Multi-Track Europe

Should the concept of building an inner circle of deep integration within the European Union fail, the traditional preference of German foreign policy would be blocked. Then, different institutional frameworks would need to be used to pursue different aspects of Germany's interests. EU integration would stagnate or recede as the next “geopolitical” enlargements increased the heterogeneity of the EU rather than deepening the consensus among member states. Security and defense would not make progress in the EU because important members would wield their power elsewhere. For the same reasons, the EU's assistance and support programs would grow – at best – at moderate levels because members would want to preserve as much fiscal autonomy as possible.

³ “Überlegungen zur europäischen Politik” [Reflections on European policy], CDU-Dokumentation 1/1995: https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=5a11d9f3-da65-432c-72e7-b321ed3a4bb7&groupId=252038.

⁴ Including this author, who has long argued for pursuing a concept of “differentiated integration,” which Chancellor Scholz rejected as a “jungle” in his Prague speech of August 29, 2022 (see note 1). My original argument can be found here: Josef Janning, “Europa braucht verschiedene Geschwindigkeiten” [Europe needs different speeds], *Europa-Archiv* 18/1994, pp. 527–536.

From a German perspective, integrating defense resources would still make a lot of sense. Doing so would create important synergies in the necessary strengthening of territorial defense against Russia. It would visibly reinforce the solidarity clauses of the EU and NATO, and it would help to control anti-German sentiments in light of Germany's future weight as the largest conventional military force in Central Europe. What is more, Germany's political elite would not feel comfortable about issuing national security guarantees but would much rather express such guarantees through institutional commitment.

Among the large member states of the European Union, no country cares more about security on the eastern flank than Germany – and Poland. If a stronger Europe will have to be built using different tracks, then these two countries are best placed to organize defense integration along Europe's eastern borders and to invite all European countries in the north and east of EU and NATO to engage with them. Together, their defense budget reaches about 90 percent of Russian defense spending – though hardly to the same effect. Germany and Poland could initiate joint conventional forces under a unified command and a single procurement scheme, permanently deploy joint forces along the border from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea, form a strong coalition within NATO, and drive consensus building in the security and defense policy processes of the EU. Such an initiative would have to be open for other countries to join.

Obviously, the state of German-Polish relations will be the linchpin of that initiative. Like in Franco-German reconciliation, it would need a historic gesture and mutual agreement on shared destiny – the most difficult task of both German foreign policy and Polish foreign policy today. For Polish leaders, it means establishing a new view of Germany and Europe; for

German leaders, it means taking the risk of being rejected by Warsaw. At a time when Germany spends more than twice the amount on defense than Poland, both sides would need to seriously want a shared defense to make the best use of their purchasing power. The steps toward that goal would greatly benefit from the participation of others, in particular the Baltic and Scandinavian states.

Currently, the odds seem to be against a mode of defense integration driven by a Polish-German initiative. The entry requirements appear insurmountable in a Poland still deeply divided over its perception of Germany, and in a Germany led by the practice of muddling through. Matters may change when circumstances change – when the asymmetries in defense spending make an impact, when the Baltic Sea states engage proactively, or when the credibility of US engagement weakens.

YOUR TURN, BERLIN!

As stated at the outset, a review of Germany's European policy options does not reveal silver bullets. Responding to the current challenges by way of strengthening European integration offers no easy wins or risk-free alternatives. All three paths outlined above – a grand design, a Core Europe, and a Multi-Track Europe – require an active German policy that speaks out to manage expectations among its partners. These steps would help win momentum for a strategic Europe:

- Germany should launch a debate about the end state of European integration by presenting its own view of what it should be. Europeans need to become clear about their level of common understanding.
- Germany and France should restart their strategic relationship – not with another symbolic event

like the Aachen Treaty, but by a visible attempt to define their common ambition for Europe. They should make clear which reforms and policies they are ready to advance and in which ways to meet the EU if and when it failed to shape up.

- Polish and German political leaders should launch a concept of “Monnet Proportion” that aims to complete the historic reconciliation between their two countries that began more than 50 years ago with Chancellor Willy Brandt falling to his knees during his visit to Warsaw in December 1970. On the basis of such a concept, both countries could then launch their joint defense initiative as laid out above.

Inevitably, this European coming-out will expose German politics to criticism and resentment. That comes with leadership. If done right, Germany would never be alone in the lead. Building partnerships is, however, itself a challenge that Berlin policymakers are not mastering right now. Given that the outside façade of Olaf Scholz's leadership looks like the continuation of Angela Merkel's principled incrementalism by involvement of other means, it is unclear whether and where strategic choices are thought through in German policy circles. Short-term responses and quick fixes do not add up to coherent strategy and effective policy frameworks. They just buy time. Today's Europe cannot afford a Germany that loses any more time.



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Rauchstraße 17/18
10787 Berlin
Tel. +49 30 2542311-0
info@dgap.org
www.dgap.org
@dgapev

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DGAP receives funding from the German Federal Foreign Office based on a resolution of the German Bundestag.

Publisher

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 1864-347

Editing Helga Beck

Layout Luise Rombach

Design Concept WeDo

Author picture(s) © DGAP



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