

# DGAP POLICY BRIEF

## Defining Feminist Foreign Policy in Germany's National Security Strategy



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Writing a National Security Strategy (NSS) in an acute crisis requires concision and priority-setting. Pairing the NSS with feminist foreign policy (FFP) – two novelties for Germany, which is formulating an overarching strategy for the first time – might seem risky for the government in Berlin. How can FFP serve as an enduring compass for the NSS in diverse policy areas? And how can the NSS process help flesh out FFP and prove its efficacy in addressing major security issues?

– In war and crisis, governments often resort to familiar but out-moded responses. Yet, novel frameworks are often precisely what is needed to prevent a return to the status quo and thus prevent future crises.

– Because FFP prioritizes human security and provides concrete guidance for German action in response to war and crises, it can break with familiar modes of crisis response that traditionally prioritize state security.

– FFP must, however, engage with pressing real-world dilemmas without compromising its long-term goals and values. This can be accomplished by learning from established concepts that bear similarities, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

– Those drafting the NSS could use both the novelty and principles of FFP to remedy known flaws in Germany's (foreign) policy coordination, thus enhancing German credibility at home and abroad.

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Crisis response is an imperfect science and often sows the seeds for the next crisis. In a crisis, governments tend to resort to familiar, but often faulty and outmoded, responses. Too narrow in focus and heavy-handed, improvised crisis management typically magnifies the faults that invited the crisis in the first place. It also tends to sideline policy fields peripheral to the crisis, but nonetheless important to recovery, or those missing from initial attempts at crisis prevention. All this hinders cohesive long-term policy, undermines the country's resilience and strengthens single policies and actors – such as the military. It fails to understand how fields should be interconnected to establish a comprehensive security policy. Germany, a status quo power, has been heavily criticized for this kind of muddling through over the past decade, sometimes even using crises as an excuse to dust off existing plans to shore up the status quo.

A desire to break this cycle and leave the past behind was likely one reason the new German government committed in its coalition agreement of December 2021 to write a National Security Strategy, and to integrate a novel policy approach – feminist foreign policy. On February 27, 2022, just three days after the Russian invasion, Germany's new Chancellor Olaf Scholz himself broke with the crisis approach associated with his predecessor, Angela Merkel, declaring a “*Zeitenwende*” – a sea change – that is set to alter the course of German security policy. Scholz promised to launch a 100-billion-euro fund for the Bundeswehr and increase the defense budget, as well as to finally reduce Germany's reliance on Russian fossil fuels.

The declaration of a sea change has significant long-term implications. Government and parliament are now working to understand the action they have committed to – and are realizing that it may risk neglecting the long-term need for innovation, even as it fills immediate gaps in German defense. Their actions could trigger fragmentation and inflation in the European defense market when consolidation and efficiency are required. And they could push up the cost of living in Germany at a time when societal cohesion is at a premium. These are just the problems with core military and defense issues. But what of the broader and longer-term implications of the *Zeitenwende*? How might the NSS, and in particular its FFP orientation, offer helpful guidance?

## SEA CHANGE OR ALL AT SEA?

The first impressions do not bode well: The federal government is under heavy international pressure and will struggle to persuade its allies of the benefits of both a security strategy process and a feminist approach. Germany's allies believe now is the time for deeds, not words. They know all too well Germany's habit of losing itself in strategic backwaters, and FFP is relatively untested, although despite the fact that a few states like Sweden, Canada and Mexico have committed to implementing it in recent years. But due to its inherent pacifism, FFP has often been criticized as aloof, unrealistic and divisive. Critics believe their fears that Germany could become lost in polarizing debate have already been confirmed. There were heated discussions among FFP proponents when, at the end of April 2022 and after much hesitation, the government took the strategically significant decision to supply heavy weapons to Ukraine (see box). FFP is having to prove itself under the toughest of conditions.

## HOW FFP DIVIDES THE GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY COMMUNITY – AND HOW TO OVERCOME THE DIVISIONS

There is a risk that FFP, instead of reframing the German strategic process in a positive manner merely adds to divisiveness in the foreign policy community. Instead, FFP should help the government find new ways to think about, for example, the delivery of heavy arms to Ukraine – ways that break current doctrinal debates and can be anchored in a long-term perspective.

As the war has unfolded, three camps have emerged in public discourse:

- A normative-activist FFP camp that, pointing to critical feminist theory, believes FFP should focus on bringing about a utopian vision of a nonviolent future world. This group is sceptical or even dismissive of issues such as arms exports and the logic of military deterrence as examples of entrenched patriarchal structures.
- A pragmatic FFP camp, which includes the German government, that considers FFP compatible with measures such as arms delivery for acute defense but has not articulated how and why. This group is still struggling to define which actions would be appropriate for a short-term application of FFP in crisis situations.

- A conservative FFP-sceptic camp that perceives itself as political realists and rejects FFP as hot air. This camp is critical towards FFP and sees it as an unrealistic utopian vision of Germany's aloof foreign policy elite. It points to the failure of the first camp to engage with the acute situation in Ukraine, and the failure of the second to add anything substantial to the discussion on arms or to mobilize support.

This clash of camps came to a head in April when the government decided to deliver arms to Ukraine. FFP activists claimed that feminist security must commit to demilitarization as increasing armament exacerbates the vulnerability of women and other marginalized groups. FFP pragmatists countered that, precisely because Russia's military is systematically targeting civilians in gross disregard of human rights norms and international humanitarian law, Germany must provide vulnerable groups with the means to defend themselves. Political "realists" seeking quick action without an exhaustive German *Grundsatzdebatte* saw these entrenched positions as proof that FFP is a pie-in-the-sky idea.

And yet, despite all this, FFP does bear the attributes to help Germany correct the emerging faults in its crisis response. FFP offers a values-oriented guideline to align the short-term necessities of human security with the long-term aims of sustaining international peace through demilitarization.

Yet, it is imperative that the German government finds a way to deal with the broader and longer-term picture beyond the transfer of arms and the 100-billion-euro fund. After all, the war in Ukraine comes on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic and amid the emerging climate crisis. Those aspects exacerbate food insecurity and raise the prospect of a far-reaching famine, forcing people to flee their home countries, destabilizing states, and depriving people of rights. The susceptibility to crisis, moreover, is reinforced by the long-term after-effects of colonial power structures apparent across African and Asian governments and seen in policy fields such as development. This is fertile soil for ever more complex conflicts – disputes that are hard to resolve.

In theory, the NSS is a chance to harness this *Zeitenwende* moment for comprehensive and long-term policy orientation. A feminist foreign policy should provide a frame for Germany to maintain this progressive long-term orientation despite all the noise and fury of the immediate crisis. And yet, FFP currently offers little guidance – it is a black box. In its coalition agreement of December 2021, the government articulated a first stab at a German approach to FFP with the formula "3R plus D" (see box): strengthening "rights[s], resources and representation" of women and girls worldwide, as well as promoting diversity. But, beyond this, ministers have offered relatively little clarity about their understanding of FFP or its place in the hierarchy of German interests and values, leaving observers to decipher the concept from German actions and a few concrete statements about what it is.

## TOWARDS A GERMAN UNDERSTANDING OF FFP

The German government has expressed its policy as "3R plus D." The formula is derived from the Swedish model of feminist foreign policy, from which it borrows the "three Rs", and can be interpreted as follows:

- Rights refers to upholding and advancing human rights of all, especially women and other marginalized groups. This means the proactive protection of rights (prevention), but also the establishment of justice (accountability).
- Representation means that women and marginalized groups should participate and be represented in foreign and security policy decision-making at all levels.
- In addition, there is the adequate provision of resources, such as discrimination-sensitive budgeting.
- The element of diversity affirms that the government takes an intersectional feminist approach, i.e. one that does not focus exclusively on women.

If the Swedish experience is anything to go by, the assumption that underpins German thinking is that, by addressing the 3R plus D, Germany will strengthen gender equality and equal participation. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and the responsible Minister of State Tobias Lindner have further underlined that FFP is to be an "inclusive, intersectional foreign policy that reflects the needs of society as a whole."

## WAYS TO GROUND THE CONCEPT OF FFP

It is therefore worth looking for "anchors" to ground FFP – familiar ideas that the NSS drafters can use to make sense – and use – of FFP. One concept is human security, an idea on which FFP draws heavily. It offers a useful corrective to much of the current security debate. It argues that security cannot be provided by merely protecting the state, but rather

requires a focus on vulnerable individuals and their rights. Take German energy dependence on Russia: Concerns over the security of gas supply in Germany are driving foreign policy in a situation where the strongest leverage and a focus on the vulnerabilities of people in Ukraine and in Germany, intertwined with their security, are needed to confront Russia's aggression. This focus on human security, rather than interstate relations, would nudge Germany to rethink its priorities and include further perspectives in decision-making.

There are in fact existing policy approaches that have at least partly incorporated this emphasis on human security. We argue that, for FFP to live up to its potential to upgrade "peripheral" security concerns in a crisis, and to set this crisis response in a progressive long-term context, it needs to build on these existing approaches. There are two pillars that FFP and the NSS drafters can build on. The first involves existing foreign policy approaches that oblige states to protect affected and vulnerable people; the second obliges states to ensure their participation in decision-making at all levels. FFP offers a way to upgrade both pillars and bring them together, while also giving them a new spin. We deal first with how this might be applied to comprehensive crisis response, and then to the question of its long-term orientation:

## THE POLICY AXIS: HOW FFP CAN HELP ENSURE A HOLISTIC AND PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

FFP is a cross-cutting approach that is meant to be integrated across policy fields such as climate, development and security policy as well as regional and domestic policies. As such, its strength lies in helping address one of German foreign policy's biggest flaws: Even under comparatively benign international circumstances, it does not seem to come naturally to Berlin to behave coherently. "Peripheral" issues are forgotten. The 2016 White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr and other strategic documents like the Guidelines for Crisis Prevention promised an "integrated approach" (*vernetzter Ansatz*) to security challenges. In practice, the approach did not appear to solve persistent issues of coordination and prioritization. Before the current government took office, the idea of a National Security Council that would centralize coordination in the Chancellery was floated again.

As with FFP, these concepts claimed a capacity for comprehensive policymaking. There is of course a risk that FFP would only encourage, like previous cross-cutting approaches, formulaic mainstreaming targets or new and compartmentalized structures, as policymakers are unsure how to respond to its broad and ambitious aims. Instead of reinventing the wheel, the implementation of FFP should build on an acknowledgement of its predecessors. FFP can serve to update and bring together existing approaches, with a critical “rebranding” that enhances the legitimacy of approaches the government is already pursuing. Namely, a values-based foreign policy that prioritizes human security and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda most clearly and obviously related to FFP.

The UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on WPS was adopted unanimously on October 31, 2000 and was a milestone in acknowledging how women and girls are disproportionately impacted by war and conflict while under-represented in decision-making and peacebuilding. This is the case even though studies show that peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are at the table (that is, women serving as active agents rather than passive recipients). The National Action Plans (NAPs) established in the framework of UNSCR 1325 and the associated resolutions offered tangible guidelines for governments' approaches and courses of action. This mechanism has created a certain degree of accountability that locks in coordinated change by participating states and organizations.

This approach of using FFP to “rebrand” existing approaches under a new umbrella may sound obvious, but it does not come naturally to FFP. Introducing a new concept like FFP may seem bold and forward-looking, which was perhaps its attraction for an ambitious new government back in December. But FFP does build on existing concepts – and not just WPS. Indeed, FFP has a less obvious predecessor: the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a concept endorsed by all United Nations member states in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was developed in the context of the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides of the 1990s. Like FFP, it concentrates on human security, giving agency to those not served by classical state security.

R2P, if applied strictly in line with its initial legal scope, displays clear similarities with FFP in its conceptual approach. Both center on the idea of human, rather than state, security – a positive understand-

ing of security as the fulfilment of important needs and human rights and one that is anchored in legal institutional structures. Nevertheless, FFP as much corrects the R2P approach as rebrands it. The R2P approach to human security has not been sensitive to the fact that some people are more vulnerable than others, taking as it does a heteronormative, gender- and raceless understanding of humans. Given the way Russia is targeting specifically civilians and vulnerable groups, this is an important addition that FFP can offer, and it would provide a significant upgrade in how Germany thinks about comprehensive crisis response.

### TIME AXIS: HOW FFP CAN BRIDGE CRISIS RESPONSE AND STRATEGIC CHANGE

FFP proponents will understandably be wary of court-ing comparison with R2P, not least because states have misused R2P for geopolitical reasons that did not conform with its legal framework. Russia's claim of acting on the basis of a responsibility to protect a Russian minority in Eastern Ukraine from genocide is just the latest example. R2P has been associated with heavy-handed humanitarian interventions by Western governments, which has led to the politicization of humanitarian work, undermining international institutions, and eventually narrowing the scope for first military and then even diplomatic intervention. This legacy is a roadblock for the kind of comprehensive policies required for successful FFP, so policy makers need to be ready to engage and correct R2P.

Yet if FFP is to provide a long-term orientation for German foreign policy, it must engage with political realities in the here and now. FFP has many potential strengths, including for a comprehensive approach as well as breaking the cycle of crisis and poor crisis response. But to achieve its potential, FFP must overcome a key weakness. The normative-activist FFP camp offers a compelling long-term vision of a peaceful and equitable world order, as well as recommendations for realizing it. But these recommendations, with their focus on demilitarization and disarmament, seem applicable only to a crisis situation that has stabilized. It is hard to see how they can be applied to the type of crisis situation now facing Germany, its allies, and partners. This makes it difficult for Germany's policy practitioners – the pragmatist FFP camp – to make their long-term feminist policies realistic in the here and now.

So how can FFP more effectively be applied to an immediate situation, like in Ukraine? The obvious answer is to learn from how previous, similarly idealistic concepts were applied in an emergency. In the case of WPS and the UNSCR 1325 structures, mechanisms have been developed for times of crisis and of peace, such as strong cooperation with local civil society, conducting gender- and discrimination-sensitive and context-oriented analyses, and appointing focal points at missions abroad. By incorporating FFP into these accepted international structures, policy-makers can bridge the gap between theoretical demands and their concrete applicability.

Yet another fruitful coupling may be with R2P, an idealistic concept that has engaged head-on with real-world dilemmas. How did R2P engage with acute realities while protecting human rights and human security? And can FFP follow suit without repeating the mistakes of R2P? R2P developed a system of prevention for peacetime and also for times of crisis. It evolved to impose three responsibilities: First, a *responsibility to prevent* situations of human insecurity through monitoring systems and redress both on the national and international level. Second, a *responsibility to react* in crisis situations to restore human security. Last but not least, a *responsibility to rebuild*, which requires the reconstruction of prevention mechanisms, thereby ensuring human security in the long run.

FFP could adopt the threefold approach of R2P (this time led by the 3R+D and broader principles of FFP such as demilitarization): preventing crises of human security and the violation of human rights; taking human security and the needs of the most vulnerable as a maxim of crisis reaction; and, once a crisis has ended, building structures that prevent a repeat of escalation. By holding those responsible to account, this approach would help restore the integrity of the international order after such a fundamental violation. Strengthening the legal frameworks associated with R2P as well as consulting affected members of society to guarantee that local perspectives guide discussions on the best means of support will help proponents of FFP avoid the kind of geopolitical misuse that has afflicted R2P.

## HOW FFP COULD ADOPT THE THREEFOLD APPROACH OF R2P

- **Prevent** crises of human security and the violation of human rights through an international monitoring system and the creation and expansion of international structures to secure human rights. This should be led by the 3R+D and core principles of FFP such as long-term demilitarization.
- **React** to acute crises by prioritizing human security and the needs of the most vulnerable as a maxim of crisis reaction. This must go hand in hand with strengthening legal frameworks as well as consulting affected members of society. This will guarantee that local perspectives guide the discussions on the best means of support, which will in turn help proponents of FFP avoid the kind of geopolitical misuse that has afflicted R2P.
- Once a crisis has ended, structures that prevent a repeat of escalation must be **rebuild** with the help of 3R+D, using the pillars of FFP to restore international order. This includes a focus on long-term demilitarization and strengthening multilateral cooperation. Those responsible must also be held accountable by seeking justice under international criminal law. This will help restore the integrity of the international order and thus strengthen its normativity after such a fundamental violation of the international order.

Learning from R2P, FFP should combine reaction with both prevention and rebuilding. In order to place its immediate actions towards Ukraine in this broader time perspective, the German government must build effective scenarios to achieve an end to the conflict and to support recovery and reconstruction afterwards. The plans must be drafted well in advance of emerging conflicts. Recovery and reconstruction efforts in Ukraine should therefore be based on discrimination-sensitive and comprehensive analyses that effectively involve civil society representatives. It will thereby focus on how conflict impacts vulnerable groups and the need to protect them, as well as strengthen their active influence in decision-making.

### THREE RECOMMENDATIONS: WHERE FFP FITS IN THE NSS

FFP has the potential to break a cycle of poor crisis response that leads to new rounds of crises. It anchors action in a progressive long-term orientation that builds international resilience and cohesion by bringing in marginalized actors. But in order to amount to more than short-term box-ticking or “pink washing,” the government’s FFP approach must be firmly established in the National Security Strategy as a continuous whole-of-government process.

The marriage of FFP and the NSS could easily lead to polarization and a degree of fragmentation, unwittingly strengthening the core of German security at the expense of more peripheral items and reverting to outmoded thinking. Or it can provide a progressive break with Germany’s old crisis-ridden approach, by bridging the long- and short-term aims; the core issues of security and more peripheral fields; and the debates inside Germany and events outside. This, of course, is what we suggest in our three recommendations.

#### 1. Treat the development of NSS and FFP as mutually reinforcing

- It is not a question of inserting FFP into the NSS: FFP should be developed in parallel to the NSS. It **should build on a review of the implementation of the integrated approach to conflict and crises**. The policy planning staff of the Foreign Office could either conduct this review itself or commission member organizations of the Advisory Board Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding to produce it by mid-October. This could usefully accompany an analysis of the implementation structures of the WPS Agenda, as well as of the threefold approach of R2P, identifying existing gaps under an FFP perspective.
- In the framework of developing its approach to FFP, the government is already engaging with feminist civil society in Germany, as well as with the few foreign governments that have adopted feminist foreign policies such as Sweden and Canada. Berlin could usefully reach out further and make use of the newly appointed **WPS representatives in its diplomatic missions** to conduct FFP assessments of key stakeholders in their countries and create pools of local (feminist) civil society members who can be mobilized in acute crises.

- This information should continuously be made available to the federal government so that during the management of acute crises as well as prevention phases the voices of those affected are amplified and integrated in decision-making – to guarantee that their realities and local perspectives guide the discussions on the best means of support. This, however, requires the protection and empowerment of those communities – with the help of 3R+D.
- The NSS should lay out the path for the expected FFP guidelines of Q1/2023. Heads of division in the Federal Foreign Office, in cooperation with the nominated FFP ambassadors in the field, should be asked to draft **sub-strategies for each regional desk and each policy area**. NSS drafters need to consider an FFP in all sub-sectors of foreign policy, but in particular in the fields of **climate, development and security policy**, as well as **regional and domestic policies**.
- The Foreign Office should also convene a conference in early 2023, bringing together the Ministries of Justice, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of the Economy and Climate, and Chancellery to discuss domestic obligations under the FFP. Their usual **focus is on the internal-external nexus**, which points to the foreign roots of Germany’s domestic security problems. FFP flips this around: For a credible FFP, the German government also needs to ensure its internal policies match international FFP requirements.

#### 2. Use the signal effect of FFP to communicate strategic goals to partners and allies

- Amid multiple ongoing strategy processes in the EU, NATO, and the UN, Germany should commit to driving an FFP agenda in particular at the EU level. In cooperation with the Czech and Swedish European Council presidencies and the EEAS, it should help prepare **Council conclusions on feminist foreign policy** to be adopted by EU leaders by March 2023.
- Beyond the EU, Germany should use the NSS to assure partners that the introduction of FFP does not imply changes in its firm commitment to alliances and common defense, in particular in the current security context. FFP does, however, carry long-term implications, e.g., the pursuit of nuclear disarmament, which will be carried out when appropriate and in a coordinated manner.

- The NSS should highlight that FFP is a continuation of **values-based/normative foreign policy**. This is advantageous in the global competition of values and matches initiatives such as the Alliance for Democracies. The self-critical and inclusive dimension of FFP will allow Germany to work more credibly with partners and offers it opportunities to explore new fields of cooperation (e.g., feminist climate justice) and more diverse partners within countries of engagement (e.g., feminist civil society in countries like Mexico, Canada or France that have adopted full or partial FFP approaches).<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ The idea to write a National Security Strategy and make it feminist may dismay Germany's allies, who were already concerned before the 2021 elections that the Greens or Social Democrats could diverge from concepts such as nuclear sharing and deterrence. So, too, the plan to follow up with an FFP strategy. However, if FFP and its implementation are explained well and placed firmly at the center of the NSS, Germany could become a more coherent, credible, and predictable partner.
- The implementation of FFP as a human-centered concept within the NSS helps the strategy to serve as a document of national identification to the German public. With its human-centered approach, FFP ensures that the strategy's perspective mirrors its reader: A human being.

### 3. Embrace FFP's capacity for continuous assessment and inclusivity for meaningful change

- Because it is reflective, the self-critical view of existing structures makes FFP an adaptive model of foreign policy strategy – in keeping with the idea of a “sea change,” in which mistakes can be analyzed and learning can be implemented constructively in the future.
- The policy planning staff of the federal government will carry responsibility for FFP but will have to ensure a cross-government effort. Mandatory courses for heads of division across all ministries on FFP, starting in spring 2023, could ensure government-wide learning effects.
- The **first FFP strategy** (expected in Q1/23) should be presented and discussed in parliament, so that FFP can be discussed in specific terms in the mainstream media. After the initial consultations, it should be discussed with civil society groups and points of criticism recorded for later reviews. FFP should be presented at regional tours in medium-sized cities and at town hall meetings. The government **will present a bi-annual review of the FFP strategy** and conduct internal FFP assessments of external policies to ensure critical accountability and to avoid a “pink-washing” or “strategy-washing.”

<sup>1</sup> See country case studies in Kristina Lunnz, “Die Zukunft der Außenpolitik ist feministisch,” 2022, Chapter 7.





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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** 2198-5936

**Editing** Ellen Thalman

**Layout** Luise Rombach

**Design Concept** WeDo

**Author picture(s)** © DGAP



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