

## **How Germany adapts to a new European reality**

*di Luca Ratti*

Germany's approval at the end of March 2025 of a historic bill which amended the country's constitution and massively boosted defence spending might signal a partial rethinking of how Berlin should promote its interests on the international stage, and where its priorities lie at a time when the US commitment to European security and transatlantic relations look increasingly shaky. The landmark decision marks a significant enhancement of the *Zeitenwende* announced by outgoing chancellor Olaf Scholz after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At the same time, it represents an additional breakaway with the narrative of Germany as 'civilian power' or *Zivilmacht*, potentially harboring the prospect of Germany's gradual return to power politics.

### ***From Westbindung to Zivilmacht***

Germany's post-war history is deeply intertwined with the history of the transatlantic community. The Federal Republic was established barely one month after the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty by the United States, Canada and ten West European countries in April 1949. At the height of the Cold War, it was quickly incorporated into the newly established Euro-Atlantic security structures under arrangements that allowed it to contribute to Western defences without developing, however, autonomous military power. The Western allies were wary of the dangers connected with the resurgence of German nationalism and militarism. They made the creation of a highly integrated NATO structure, including the appointment of a supreme commander and the establishment of a combined military staff, a precondition for its inclusion in the Alliance in the mid-1950s.

The West's complementary objectives of integrating and containing the Federal Republic were aptly described by the mantra attributed to NATO's first secretary

general Lord Ismay that the Alliance kept ‘the Americans in, the Soviets out, and the Germans down’. This statement summarised in a nutshell NATO’s strategic purpose of dual containment. The Alliance contained the Soviet Union but also discouraged a revival of German militarism, while preventing the Federal Republic from entertaining any neutralist temptations. During the Cold War, the Federal Republic’s objectives largely overlapped with those of the United States. West German decision-makers favoured a policy of *Westbindung* through Western European integration, Franco-German reconciliation, and the rearmament of the Federal Republic. By the 1970s, Germany spent about 4% of its GDP on defence, while the *Bundeswehr* had become the largest Western European armed force of roughly 490.000 units along with 2,500 heavy tanks.

Meanwhile, membership in both NATO and the European Communities remained the undisputed lodestars of a German foreign policy rooted in transatlantic multilateralism and European integration during the remaining years of the Cold War, after the end of the East-West division the US expected a united Germany to assume a more prominent international role. In May 1989 President George H.W. Bush hailed Germany as the US’ new partner in leadership, causing a degree of anxiety in many West European capitals. Nonetheless, in the following years the firmness of the American commitment to NATO, together with Germany’s post-war culture of restraint, acted as important inhibiting factors, delaying for the Federal Republic the urgency and travails of adapting to the post-Cold War systemic context.

The leading economy in Europe, wary of the persisting diffidence of some of its European partners, was rather hesitant to step into a new lead role, preferring to continue to rely on the U.S. security blanket and shying away from power politics. In other words, the Germans preferred ‘to lead from the middle rather than from the front’. After the end of the Cold War the Federal Republic was also keen to pursue profitable trade relations with the Kremlin. This policy was nested in the narrative of ‘*Wandel durch Handel*’ or ‘Change Through Trade’, reflecting the old leitmotiv of an Eastern policy –*Ostpolitik* – that since the early 1960s had developed, alongside the Federal Republic’s traditional policy of *Westbindung*, with the aim of deepening East-West dialogue. Germany’s economy vastly profited from this bilateral partnership. However,

it also contributed to foster a decades-long energy dependency, while causing anxiety in the U.S. and in some of Germany's East European neighbours, such as Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine, which in 2019 likened the impact of the construction of Nord Stream 2 to a new Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

During the 1990s and early 2000s German academics and intellectuals praised this cautious conduct, employing the concept of *Zivilmacht* or 'civilian power' to account for Germany's culture of restraint, commitment to multilateralism and reluctance to engage in military operations. Germany did not take part in the campaign to liberate Kuwait from occupying Iraqi forces in 1991, providing mere financial support to the coalition assembled by the United Nations in the aftermath of the invasion. It was initially reluctant to contribute to peacekeeping and crisis management operations in the former Yugoslavia and the Western Balkans, doing so in earnest only after the 1994 landmark ruling of the Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe that the *Bundeswehr* participation in NATO's 'out-of-area' operations did not infringe on the constitutional provisions of Article 24 of the 1949 Basic Law. Although the Federal Republic participated in the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, in 2003 it firmly opposed the US decision to overthrow the Baathist regime in Iraq. Furthermore, while deploying one of the largest contingents in the NATO-led force in Afghanistan, it placed significant restrictions on the use of force by the *Bundeswehr*. In 2011, in the aftermath of the Arab Springs, the German government abstained in the United Nations Security Council vote on Resolution 1973, authorizing member states to use any necessary means to protect civilians, at a time when the Obama administration expected the European allies to play a prominent role in the solution of the Libyan crisis.

This foreign policy course and the analytical narrative of 'civilian power' were largely dependent, however, upon US willingness to continue shouldering the lion's share of the burden of European and Western security after the end of the Cold War. As long as the US enjoyed unrivalled worldwide power and maintained a firm commitment to European security, Germany, like many of its West European partners, could afford eluding difficult choices. In the 2010s, however, as US strategic focus began to shift towards Asia and relations between Moscow and the West badly deteriorated following

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Germany undertook a first reassessment of its traditional anti-militarist posture and identity as 'civilian power' or *Zivilmacht*.

Between 2016 and 2020, the uncertainty created by the first Trump administration's attitude toward NATO and its virulent attacks against Germany's policy of low military spending and accusations to Berlin of owing 'vast amounts of money' to the United States, together with the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, further highlighted the need for a reappraisal of Germany's traditional foreign policy. Then Chancellor Angela Merkel remarked in 2017 that 'the days when Europeans could fully rely on others for the preservation of their security were over'. The signing of the Aachen Treaty in 2019 by Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron – on the very same day that Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer had signed the Élysée Treaty in January 1963 – aimed to foster closer cooperation with France in the context of a potential American disengagement from Europe and seemed to revive the Federal Republic's Gaullist temptations of the early 1960s.

Back then, in the aftermath of the construction of the Berlin Wall and of the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy administration's shift to the military doctrine of "flexible response" had led West Europeans to question whether Washington would sacrifice New York for Paris or Hamburg in a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. For the first time some West German decision-makers were then tempted to embrace General De Gaulle's plans to establish a 'Third Force' Europe and to consider the development of an autonomous nuclear arsenal.

### ***Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Zeitenwende***

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the announcement of the *Zeitenwende* by Chancellor Olaf Scholz (leading a center-left coalition government) triggered widespread expectations of a U-Turn in Germany's foreign and security policy away from the narrative of 'civilian power', raising the prospect of a Germany that would be much more proactive and engaged in solving global crises and propping up European security. Scholz proclaimed far-reaching changes, including the promise of a significant increase in military expenditures, the procurement of additional military capabilities and new deployments to bolster NATO's eastern flank.

The German government also set up a special fund (*Sondervermögen*) of €100 billion, financed by debt and dedicated entirely to the procurement of new materiel for the *Bundeswehr*, which had found itself extremely depleted after many years of post-Cold War military downsizing.

The *Zeitenwende* ushered in an increase in defence spending and provided significant aid to Ukraine. Germany ranked second only to the US in military support for Ukraine and took a prominent role to bolster NATO's eastern flank, agreeing to station a 5,000 strong brigade in Lithuania and contributing to protect airspace both in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. Berlin also pursued a 10 billion euro deal with the United States to buy F-35s to replace its aging Tornado fleet. As a result, in 2024 defence spending in Germany rose by 23.2%, reaching NATO's 2% of GDP target and helping drive a record 11.7% increase in defense expenditure among NATO's European members. Berlin also welcomed a large influx of refugees, hosting more than 1.2 million Ukrainians, while drastically downgrading its bilateral relations with Russia.

Nonetheless, although the *Zeitenwende* triggered a change of narrative in Berlin and prompted decisions previously considered unattainable, many of the initial commitments were never fully implemented, while the promised overhaul of the *Bundeswehr* was plagued by problems of budgeting issues and lack of personnel. The resilience of Germany's foreign policy identity as *Zivilmacht* and the lack of a widespread domestic consensus caused additional hurdles, slowing adaptation in some areas and allowing political opponents to push back. The government proved cautious in supplying Ukraine with sophisticated offensive hardware and refused to export the long-range missile system Taurus. A report presented in March 2025 to the *Bundestag* stressed that, although the *Bundeswehr* continued its rearmament, it still suffers from serious personnel and equipment shortages. Former defense minister Boris Pistorius and members of the Christian Democratic party even called for a reinstatement of some form of conscription or national military service to meet the *Bundeswehr* target of a force of 203,000 soldiers by 2031.

### ***Toward Epochenbruch?***

The evolution of German security and defense policy further accelerated after the result of the 2024 U.S. presidential elections. Faced with increasing concerns about the strength of the U.S. commitment to European security, German decision-makers began to contemplate additional moves. The signing of the Trinity House agreement between the Federal government and the United Kingdom in October 2024 revived bilateral cooperation between London and Berlin, while also serving the purpose of keeping the UK engaged in the defense of NATO's Eastern flank. Together with the 2010 Anglo-French Lancaster House Treaty and the 2019 Franco-German Aachen treaty, the bilateral agreement with the UK also strengthens European security in the eventuality of a diminished American commitment to NATO.

In the run-up to Germany's 2025 parliamentary elections, the leader of the Christian-Democratic Union and candidate chancellor Friedrich Merz doubled-down on the narrative of the *Zeitenwende*, referring to the current systemic dynamics as an *Epochenbruch* ("Historical turn") and promising to implement a thorough overhaul of Germany's security and defense policies. In the context of deepening tension between the US and some of its European allies, he spoke of a 'whatever it takes' moment for Germany. The Christian Democratic candidate chancellor also claimed that one of his priorities will be to return Germany to a position of leadership in Europe and proposed discussions with France and the UK on a new nuclear-sharing arrangement.

The new plans might trigger the end of Germany's traditional role as 'civilian power', while strengthening prospects for a nuclear sharing agreement with the UK and France and for a German nuclear latency — the acquisition of the technical capacity to produce atomic weapons — as a hedge against future contingencies. It cannot be ruled out that in the longer term changed systemic conditions might prompt eventually revive Germany's interest in a homegrown nuclear deterrent.

In this context, the plans that were approved last week with the support of the Christian Democrats, their Bavarian sister party, the CSU, the Socialists and the Greens, represents a significant expansion of the *Zeitenwende* and a potential U-Turn from the notion of 'civilian power' in an increasingly uncertain European security architecture. The new measures will exempt spending on defense above 1% of gross domestic

product from the debt ceilings rule. Hence, they required a relaxation of Germany's constitutionally enshrined 'debt brake', which had been introduced by former Christian Democratic chancellor Angela Merkel in 2009 and limited new borrowing to 0.35% of GDP in compliance with Germany's tradition of fiscal austerity and in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis.

An additional special fund of €500 billion will be set up to boost Germany's ailing economy and revive its industrial production, with one-fifth of that funding to be committed to fighting climate change. The new exemptions will also allow spending to assist states victim of an armed attack, thus potentially unlocking additional aid for Ukraine, which had been held up for months by the outgoing government.

Echoing Merkel's 2017 statements, a disenchanted Merz has claimed that one of his priorities will be to shore up Europe's defences in the face of persisting tension with Russia and to increase its autonomy from the United States. Merz also called the new measures a paradigm shift for Germany and Europe and as a step towards the establishment of a European Defence Community, overlooking fundamental differences between the treaty built on the plan that French Prime Minister René Pleven had put forward in October 1950 and the current state of European security cooperation.

While this is a landmark move, Germany remains, however, a long way to go before achieving its stated ambitions. As was the case during the Cold War, the modern *Bundeswehr* is not conceived as a warfighting but rather as a defense and conventional deterrence force. Furthermore, although many of the concerns over German militarism seem to be abated, the vestiges of a Cold War-minded refusal of any *Sonderweg* ('special path') are still alive in Berlin. The rise of *Alternative Für Deutschland* and of the *Bündnis Sarha Wagenknecht* in the 2024 European elections and the success of AFD – now the second largest political force in the next *Bundestag* and the first party to the right of the CDU/CSU to hold such a position since the Second World War – in the 2025 political elections, as well as the positive result of *die Linke*, confirm the undercurrents and persisting doubts of part of Germany's public opinion.

In the early stages of the Cold War, Germany was rapidly rehabilitated and incorporated into the Western security structures. While after the end of the East-West division, German decision-makers took full advantage of the “peace dividend”, Berlin may now be on the cusp of a sea change in its security and defense policy and attitude to European and transatlantic security. The March 2025 votes in the *Bundestag* and the *Bundesrat* – the two Houses of the German Parliament – removing the constitutional debt brake on defense spending, together with the assertive narrative of Chancellor-in-waiting Friedrich Merz, mark a breakaway from Germany’s identity as a *Zivilmacht* and a potential step in the direction of a new *Machtpolitik*.

In the context of a weakened transatlantic alliance, Berlin’s return to power politics might lead, however, to the reemergence of old fears in Europe about German power and militarism. In order to assuage the anxiety of its neighbors and allow Berlin to assume a leadership role in a highly sensitive policy area, Germany’s new course might require not only close bilateral coordination with the other members of the European Union and with the European Commission but also a comprehensive reform of the EU’s institutional structure.