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Germany's *Zeitenwende*: A Year After the Invasion of Ukraine by Russia

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What was *Zeitenwende*?

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's speech to the Bundestag on February 27 characterized Germany in 2022. The "*Zeitenwende*" ("turning point of the times"; English translation: watershed) of which Scholz spoke in his speech became the German buzzword of the year 2022, appearing frequently in all media.¹

It should be noted, however, that the word's meaning changed as more and more media outlets came to use the word. Whereas in the original Scholz speech the Russian invasion of Ukraine itself was referred to as *Zeitenwende*, Germany's response to it gradually came to be referred to as *Zeitenwende*.² In addition to this, NATO and the EU exhibited changes never seen before in such a critical situation, and all of these changes came to be seen as *Zeitenwende*, giving the impression that the term had taken on a life of its own. In this paper, I would like to consider anew what has changed and what has not changed in German security policy one year after the invasion.

"Change" and "no change" in Germany

As I mentioned in my previous article, German diplomacy has traditionally been considered to have three principles. The first is "Never again" (*nie wieder Krieg*), referring to the principle of never starting war again, or pacifism. The second is "Never alone" (*kein Alleingang*), referring to multilateralism. The third is "Never again Auschwitz" (*nie wieder Auschwitz*), which first emerged during the bombing of Kosovo. This created a new avenue for participation in military intervention, if necessary, from a humanitarian perspective. These three principles are not necessarily always realized at the same time.³

With these principles in mind, let us review the changes in German diplomacy over the past year. First, prior to the outbreak of the war, Germany was clearly reluctant to provide any arms; still fresh in our minds is its decision in early February 2022 to send 500 helmets that drew bitter criticism at home and abroad. This is why the speech delivered by Chancellor Scholz on February 27, three days after the invasion, attracted so much attention. In his speech, Scholz emphasized that the security environment in Europe, including Germany, had changed drastically, and he argued that changes in security policy, including achieving defense spending equivalent to 2% of GDP, were necessary to respond to these changes.

On the other hand, caution must be exercised in how such "changes" are viewed, as already noted in my previous article. Although there was general approval of the increase in defense spending from the time of the announcement, there was no consensus on its allocation.⁴ Germany did not change completely in February 2022, but continued to be hit by subsequent waves of change, each of which led to contentious debate within the country. Even with regard to the supply of arms to Ukraine promised in Scholz's speech, for example, the decision to provide heavy weapons such as Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft guns was not made until two months later, and the first Gepards did not arrive in Ukraine until the end of July.⁵

As the fighting dragged on into the fall, the debate over tanks gradually began to heat up. In early December, Mykhailo Podolyak, an advisor to President Zelensky, wrote on Twitter that his "Christmas wishlist" included "1. Leopards 2. Marders 3. Abrams 4. Patriots 5. ATACMS"⁶, and President Zelensky repeatedly requested the provision of tanks at a meeting at the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force on December 19 and at a summit with US President Biden on December 21.⁷

The US government was not disposed at the time to provide either Patriot missiles or tanks.⁸ The German government was similarly negative about supplying tanks and, in a joint US-German declaration issued after a telephone conversation between Chancellor Scholz and President Biden on January 5, 2023, it was promised to provide Marder infantry fighting vehicles but no mention was made of Leopards⁹. In addition, the export of Leopards to Ukraine by other countries would require export approval from Germany, the country producing the weapon system, and Germany was reluctant to grant this approval.

This German attitude was strongly criticized, especially by neighboring countries. In Germany itself, intellectuals in Berlin were among the harshest critics of the Scholz administration.¹⁰ The debate accelerated further at the beginning of the year when Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht (SPD), who had made numerous blunders, was effectively ousted and replaced with Boris Pistorius (SPD).

It was not until January 25 that Chancellor Scholz finally announced that tanks would be made available, making it clear that the German government would provide Leopards and that its allies would also agree to provide Leopards to Ukraine. He also announced at the same time that the US would supply Abrams tanks. The German government emphasized the success of its concerted action with the US and once again demonstrated the German principle of "Never alone".

Party politics and domestic public opinion

The German government's hesitation regarding the provision of tanks is considered symbolic of the "Never again" pacifism within the three principles. From the outset, though, this attitude was criticized domestically as well. At the forefront of this criticism was the Green Party, a member of the ruling coalition. The Greens hold the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs in the current administration, and Minister Annalena Baerbock has consistently shown her support for Ukraine since immediately after the war began. Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck, another Green Party member, has also spoken out in support of Ukraine, even when he was put in the difficult position of having to delay the shutdown of nuclear power plants in order to move Germany away from energy dependence on Russia.¹¹ The fiscally hawkish Free Democratic Party (FDP), with its Finance Minister, also made its support for Ukraine clear from the beginning, and Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmerman, its parliamentary group leader, expressed a positive attitude toward the provision of tanks from an early stage.¹²

In contrast to these two parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) remained reluctant to the end. In particular, Rolf Mützenich, chairman of the SPD parliamentary group, was seen as the main opponent of the tank grant. His argument was that the provision of tanks could lead to further escalation and that diplomatic efforts were necessary. This attitude is understood to be closely related to the success of the Eastern policy "developed" by the SPD. It was the SPD that had succeeded in improving relations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and this success was achieved through "change through rapprochement ". It was not easy for the SPD to move beyond this success story.

On the other hand, Lars Klingbeil, the SPD's co-leader, has taken a relatively aggressive stance on arms transfers. The SPD's new foreign policy guidelines he released assert how much the SPD has changed. The document is said to have been modified considerably in its wording due to opposition from the left-wing faction of the party, illustrating the swing of opinion within the party.¹³ Chancellor Scholz decided to provide tanks while keeping an eye on these differences of opinion within his own party and, in order to successfully walk the difficult tightrope of breaking the "Never again" principle and accommodating the conflicts of opinion within his own party, it was necessary to adhere to the "Never alone" principle. In this respect, the "approach" to policymaking in Germany has not changed.

In addition, the current German government is the first three-party coalition government in history, making administration increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the FDP and the Greens in the coalition are not so monolithic either. Although the nuclear energy issue is important for the Greens in terms of party identity, there are still conflicts within the party, as pointed out earlier.¹⁴ In addition, the consumption of coal increased during the unprecedented energy crisis despite environmental issues being the party's most important focus, leading to massive demonstrations by environmental activists against the expansion of coal mines.¹⁵ Against this backdrop, the debate over supplying tanks to Ukraine has taken on a more complex form at the level of public opinion.

According to a public opinion poll released on January 19, views on the provision of tanks are sharply divided (46% favor the provision of tanks and 43% do not). It is not difficult to imagine that many in the former West German regions are in favor of the provision of tanks, while many in the former East German regions are opposed. It is interesting to note that the younger the age, the more likely respondents were to be opposed to the provision of tanks, with the percentage of those in favor increasing with age.¹⁶ This result is somewhat odd, considering the positive stance of the Green Party, which has succeeded in attracting the votes of relatively younger voters, toward the provision of tanks. The results are also very interesting when we look at approval and disapproval by party affiliation. For example, among supporters of the FDP, which includes Strack-Zimmermann, a sharp critic of SPD parliamentary group leader Mützenich, the even split over the tank grant is striking (48% in favor, 48% opposed).

A closer look at the details of the German *Zeitenwende* thus makes it clear that it did not necessarily change all at once, nor can it be explained by party affiliation alone.¹⁷ The German *Zeitenwende* has progressed in relation to the different preferences of eastern and western Germany, age groups and, of course, to other policy areas such as environmental issues and energy policy. The basis for this has remained the same three-principle thinking.¹⁸

Conclusion

In the midst of conflicting opinions on both domestic and international politics, the Scholz administration managed to stage a "transformation" in the form of the provision of tanks. According to "Evaluation of the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by citizens of different countries"¹⁹ published in a report by the Munich Security Conference in February 2023, the German government was well received across the board. Notably, Germany is rated highly by Ukrainian citizens and, although it scored lower than the clear leaders the UK, US, and Canada (ranked 1-3), Germany ranked 6th after the EU (4th) and Ukraine (5th). It can thus be said that support from Germany is highly valued by Ukrainian citizens.

While other countries also gave relatively high ratings (around 20 points), Japan was the one country that gave Germany a conspicuously "low" rating (negative 2). Japan also gave itself a low rating of negative 22 and, while its overall scoring was noticeably "harsh," the low rating for Germany is still interesting. The two countries, which have much in common historically and are frequently compared due to their "non-war-oriented" cultures, are often mentioned in parallel regarding *Zeitenwende*. The two countries also have similar economic structures that are dependent on imports from certain countries, and avenues for German-Japanese cooperation are being explored from this perspective.²⁰ It is hoped that further mutual understanding will be fostered in the course of strengthening these close ties.

¹ Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache e. V., Die Wörter des Jahres 2022 (<https://gfds.de/wort-des-jahres-2022/>)

² Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022 (<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356>)

³ See my article "The Changing European Security Environment and Germany" (https://www.jiia.or.jp/strategic_comment/2022-05.html).

⁴ Zeit Online, "Fünf Parteien, ein Kompromiss - und zwei offene Fragen" (<https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2022-05/sondervoegen-bundeswehr-ampel-union-kompromiss>)

⁵ Tagesschau, "Wie aus Helmen Panzer wurden" (<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/waffenlieferungen-ukraine-zeitenwende-101.html>)

⁶ 1 and 3 are tanks, 2 are infantry fighting vehicles, and 4 and 5 are missile designations. France 24, "Why the US declined to send Ukraine long-range missiles, tanks" (<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20221222-why-the-us-declined-to-send-ukraine-long-range-missiles-tanks>)

⁷ Reuters, "Ukraine's Zelenskiy asks European leaders for air defence, tanks, weapons" (<https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-zelenskiy-asks-western-leaders-wide-range-weapons-systems-2022-12-19/>)

⁸ *The New York Times*, "Zelenskiy's Weapons Wish List Goes Mostly Unfulfilled on Trip to Washington" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/22/us/politics/ukraine-zelenskiy-biden-weapons.html>)

⁹ The US government also pledged to provide Bradley infantry fighting vehicles at this time, again in strict adherence to multilateralism. The White House, "Joint Press Statement Following a Call between the President Joe Biden and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany Olaf Scholz" (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/05/joint-press->

[statement-following-a-call-between-the-president-joe-biden-and-the-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-olaf-scholz/](#))

¹⁰ On the other hand, there are some - but not many - experts in Germany who are cautious about the provision of tanks. The following video shows that, even among international political scientists who deem themselves "realists," opinions are diametrically opposed. (<https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Masala-und-Varwick-streiten-ueber-den-Ukraine-Krieg-Das-ist-kein-Kompromiss-Johannes-article23915031.html>)

¹¹ This attitude of the Green Party politicians was also reminiscent of that of Joschka Fischer, who served as Foreign Minister under Gerhard Schröder and introduced "Never again Auschwitz". It is fair to say that humanitarianism trumps pacifism in this debate.

¹² Tagesschau, "Strack-Zimmermann kritisiert Kanzleramt" (<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/strack-zimmermann-kritik-101.html>)

¹³ Süddeutsche Zeitung, "Wie sich die SPD von ihrer alten Ostpolitik verabschiedet" (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/spd-aussenpolitik-neuausrichtung-1.5737561>)

¹⁴ There was an apparent disagreement between Economic Affairs Minister Habeck and Green Party co-chairman Ricarda Lang over the issue of nuclear power plants. Zeit online, "Grünenchefin zieht rote Linie bei Atomkraftwerken" (<https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2022-10/gruene-ricarda-lang-akw-brennstaebe-kauf>)

¹⁵ Many of the activists who gathered in the village of Lützerath, where the mine is located, were also supporters of the Green Party, and their criticism extended to the Green Party itself. Tagesschau, "Die Grünen und ihr Lützerath-Problem" (<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/gruene-luetzerath-107.html>)

¹⁶ In former West German regions, the numbers are 50% in favor and 38% against, while in former East German regions the numbers are almost reversed: 32% in favor and 59% against. Tagesschau, "Deutsche beim Thema 'Leopard' gespalten" (<https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/deutschlandtrend/deutschlandtrend-3277.html>)

¹⁷ The fact that party affiliation alone cannot explain the policies of the government may be related to the fact that in Germany, as in other developed countries, party membership is on the decline.

¹⁸ Once again, all three principles are not always fulfilled.

¹⁹ Munich Security Conference Report 2023

Revision (<https://securityconference.org/publikationen/munich-security-report-2023/>), p. 21. The figures are calculated by subtracting the share of countries rated "done well" from the share rated "done badly." Data points are for October-December 2022.

²⁰ Compared to the previous administration of Angela Merkel, who visited Japan only six times during her 16 years in office, it is significant that Chancellor Scholz visited Japan with key ministers. (https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/erp/c_see/de/page4_005815.html)