

ZEITENWENDE AND THE GERMAN NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY: ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this paper is to characterise the German term *Zeitenwende* as a “turning point in history”, which culminated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the first German national security strategy. The paper examines if and how the global *Zeitenwende* changed German security and defence policy through four variables: a strategic environment, the character of security policy, perceived threats, and responses. This change is examined through the use of the concept of change in international relations and methods of historical and content analysis, as well as comparative methods. The structured interview is also used for the collection of relevant data. The paper concludes that, on the one hand, the *Zeitenwende* proves German transatlantic and multilateral security policy identity and interests, such as a greater and more accepted influence within NATO, holding the European division line and Russian geopolitical interests away from German borders, and spreading the European security order as wide as possible. On the other side, it contributes to the further evolution of German security policy by releasing it from residual Second World War constraints. Finally, the *Zeitenwende* involves Germany more strongly in a global systemic rivalry, making it less dependent on other “poles” of world order and with a priority given to competing with challengers rather than changing them from within.

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Introduction

When the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered his speech in the Bundestag on February 27, 2022, three days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he probably did not know that it would receive the attention and importance of Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference (MSC) speech or even George W. H. Bush's address to the US Congress in 1990 on a new world order (Scholz 2022a). However, that is exactly what happened. This speech, now known as the "*Zeitenwende* speech", similar to Putin's and Bush's speeches before, marks the recognition of a turning point in contemporary international relations and an announcement of the dawn of a new era. It signifies the awareness of actors that the new age has come and serves as a main determinant of the change in states' foreign, security, and defence policies, including German ones. At the national level, it claims to encompass both: setting a new mindset that shifts the pendulum of the perception of the world order from the globalised to the contested multipolar world order, which demands different means for the preservation of German interests and values, and the creation of new and stronger security and defence capabilities, released from the post-Second World War constraints.

The year 1990 marked the dawn of the new world order, which signified the coming of better relations among the great powers, especially between the US and USSR, and their cooperation in the United Nations (UN) in order to resolve international disputes and put an end to any tyranny and aggression. After the collapse of the USSR, which led to a significant shift in global power dynamics, a pivotal moment emerged, usually referred to as a unipolar moment in history, where the US acted as a global leader in shaping the world order. Consolidation of the new Russian state, faced with the overwhelming influence and spread of Western influence and institutions, together with their sometimes military and overt actions in order to control areas in the East as Russia perceived them, led Putin in 2007 to announce a more assertive Russian foreign policy, including military responses to what it considers to be its national interests and priority areas. More assertive Russian foreign and security policy, together with the rise of new centres of economic influence, such as China and India, represents a process of multi-polarisation of the world order. Faced with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the new German chancellor has the role in the political domain to announce the end of one era and the coming of a new era, this time marking the significance of a more conflictual multipolar world order for German security and defence policy. The *Zeitenwende*, a word used in Scholz's speech from February 27, 2022, has become the watermark of this new era, a turning point that also represents the need for a stronger German national security and defence policy and posture, which would later be reflected in one of

the most significant and visible outputs of this change — the first German National Security Strategy (GNSS) adopted on June 14, 2023.

The subject of this paper is thus to conceptualise the *Zeitenwende* as a “turning point in history” that culminates with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and examine if and how it has changed German security and defence policy through four variables that are most often parts of any security strategy: a strategic environment, a policy, a threat, and a response. This change is examined through the use of the concept of change in international relations and methods of historical and content analysis, as well as comparative methods, in assessing the German defence policy before and after February 24, 2022. The structured interview is also used for the collection of relevant data about the subject. The Russian war in Ukraine and the *Zeitenwende* have led to the creation of a more assertive and bolder German security and defence policy, primarily in terms of responses to the new threats but not against its identity, a break-up in relations with Russia, more financial funds dedicated to the army and weapons production, as well as self-reliability and position in NATO. The paper concludes that, on the one side, the *Zeitenwende* proves the German transatlantic and multilateral security policy identity and interests, such as a greater and more accepted influence within NATO, holding the European division line and Russian geopolitical interests away from German borders, and spreading the European security order as wide as possible. On the other side, it contributes to the further evolution of German security policy by releasing it from residual Second World War constraints, primarily through its function as a staple or linchpin between transatlantic demands since 2014 and German domestic conditions. Finally, the *Zeitenwende* involves Germany more strongly in a global systemic rivalry, making it less dependent on other “poles” of world order and with a priority given to competing with challengers rather than changing them from within.

This article starts with a conceptual explanation of the notion of *Zeitenwende*, a turning point in history that also marks the end of one era and the coming of a new era in international relations. The second part briefly presents German security and defence policy and documents until 2022 according to four variables, while the third considers changes that the *Zeitenwende* has brought in terms of the perception of the security environment, the character of security policy and threats, and a new response that is part of the first GNSS.

Conceptualisation of the *Zeitenwende*: a transformative moment in international relations and German security policy

“Change is a mighty engine for debate”, said Kal Holsti (2009) in his famous book *Taming the Sovereigns*. Indeed, although we all sense the “wind of

change” in current international relations, we still wonder what kind of change is happening and what it means for the world order as a whole and the security and defence policies of key European countries in particular. How far have the changes in world order and the Russian war in Ukraine changed German security policy, and in what direction? The notion of *Zeitenwende* offers an answer to this question by becoming a new linchpin between transatlantic demands in a new security environment and German internal conditions to positively respond to such demands. This was possible only after February 24, 2022, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which also explains why the *Zeitenwende* was not already introduced as a concept in the German political realm, although it appeared much earlier among the German security expert community.

The end of the Cold War brought many questions and debates on German foreign and security policy, where the “central question” or the *Gretchenfrage*, as Hyde-Price (2000, 6) highlighted it, was whether united Germany would continue to be multilaterally oriented and institutionally embedded in Western institutions or pursue its national interest in a more unilateral or “German way”, as Chancellor Schröder put it when refusing to participate in a US-led military campaign against Iraq in 2003. According to Schröder (2014, 78), the Afghan war had further enhanced Germany’s “disorientation in security policy” instead of clarifying Germany’s “strategic viewpoint”, and proved its unwillingness to take an appropriate share of responsibility, which raised suspicion about its trustworthiness as an alliance member. Germany’s refusal to participate in military interventions in Libya, Iraq, and Syria afterwards has further undermined some of the allies and the US’s trust in the German role as the leader of the European pillar of the transatlantic alliance. However, what Germany followed was the commitment to its long-standing position of suspicion regarding the pre-emptive use of force, especially without a UN mandate, as well as the use of force for regime change and without the consent and consultancy of other transatlantic Allies. This added to the expectations of those actors who wanted to see Germany as a “rational” actor, confronted with any form of “adventurism” that might occur in NATO, thus correcting the course of action this organisation might take.

The German security and defence policy after the Second World War can best be explained as the result of the ever-present tension between the demands of the allies as to what kind of role Germany should play in order to address the perceived transatlantic threats and challenges and the German strategic culture created after the Second World War, primarily commitment to multilateralism and aversion to the use of force without an appropriate international mandate. In some cases, like Iraq, the difference appeared between US-led military operations and those based on a broad transatlantic

consensus and with the UN mandate. In these instances of considerable gaps between transatlantic demands and internal conditions, or multilateralism and transatlanticism, the history of German security and defence policy is full of creating staples or linchpins. In the case of Yugoslavia, including the Kosovo crisis, that was alliance solidarity, common European foreign and security policy, the credibility and perception of Germany around the world, Germany's responsibility to use force to end the war, and its responsibility to prevent war crimes. In the case of Russia, it is the *Zeitenwende*.

The *Zeitenwende* also enabled the further evolution of a gradual process, or "trajectory of change", as Longhurst (2004, 70) labelled it, in the formation and adaptation of a security and defence policy of a united Germany after the Cold War, or the process of "normalisation" of the German state through the gradual lifting of constraints imposed on it after the Second World War (demilitarisation, disarmament, and elimination and control of all German industry that could be used for military production).

Not so many phrases in international relations deserve such attention as the English phrases *The End of History*, *War on Terror*, and, nowadays, the German *Zeitenwende*, which combines the words *Zeit* (time, era, or period) and *Wende* (change). Each of them marks a turning point in the history of international relations and the dawn of something new in relations among the main actors. The *Zeitenwende* was even named the German word of the year 2022 (*Deutsche Welle* 2022). Also, the German Council of Foreign Relations developed the "Action Group *Zeitenwende*" with the aim of helping Germany develop both its willingness and capacity to act effectively not only in defence but in the economy, trade, technology, energy, climate, society, and foreign policy (DGAP 2023).

Developed to grasp the turning points in history and international relations, these phrases try to catch the significance of the moment they are referring to – the end of one epoch and the approaching of another. While the first phrase at the end of history marked the expectation of better times embodied in the form of greater cooperation, peace, and prosperity, the *War on Terror* marked the rise of qualitatively new threats and actors – asymmetrical in the form of international terrorism and weak states. The *Zeitenwende*, on the other hand, marks the new uncertainty of divided and extremely competitive, even conflictual, relations among nations and brings symmetrical or state-related competitive and conflictual relations into the focus once again. In the German case, this transition means the transition from a more restrained to a more extensive security and defence policy and more military strength for Germany, thus closing the gap between willingness and capabilities to act. As Scholz (2022a) put it:

“We are living through a watershed era (*Zeitenwende*). And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before. The issue at the heart of this is whether power is allowed to prevail over the law. Whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the age of the great powers or whether we have it in us to keep warmongers like Putin in check. That requires strength of our own.”

However, although now widely connected to German Chancellor Scholz in the political realm, he was not the one to originally use the word *Zeitenwende* to describe the profound changes occurring in the international order. In 2017, Joachim Krause (2017) from Kiel University and a Chairman of the Scientific Directorate of the Research Institute of the German Council on Foreign Relations wrote a paper titled “Die neue Zeitenwende in den internationalen Beziehungen – Konsequenzen für deutsche und europäische Politik” (eng. *The new turning point in international relations – consequences for German and European politics*). In 2018, a long-time president of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel (2018) wrote a book titled “Zeitenwende in der Weltpolitik: Mehr Verantwortung in ungewissen Zeiten” (eng. *A turning point in world politics: More responsibility in uncertain times*). In October 2020, the MSC published a Special Edition of the Munich Security Report (MSC 2020) on German Foreign and Security Policy titled “Zeitenwende | Wendezeiten”, which stated that we were already “in the midst of a *Zeitenwende*, the turn of an era, in which established foreign policy certainties of the Federal Republic are evaporating.” Thus, Scholz’s “*Zeitenwende* speech” came almost a year and a half after this Report, amplified by the Russian war in Ukraine and allies expectations of a more engaged German reaction to it.

Two points are of importance here. First, the change or turning point in international relations, and second, the way this change challenges and changes the main pillars of German security and defence policy and the German response to it. Regarding the first point, the *Zeitenwende* refers to “a turning point in the history of our continent”, “a changing of the times”, “an epochal shift”, or “an epochal tectonic shift”, and marks the end of the process of transitioning the world order towards the multipolar one. The post-World War II international order is often described as a product of American strength, but that order is also a product of “the artificial weakness of Germany and Japan” (Leonard 2022). In these terms, the order is also changing, with Germany and Japan becoming the real equal partners in providing alliance/partnership defence. Thus, in the framework of a more assertive China and Russia, these two countries should be proven as indispensable partners for the preservation of a favourable world order. Before the *Zeitenwende*, on two occasions, allies needed and called for a militarily stronger Germany: in 1955, when Western Germany entered NATO and was rearmed (see, for example, Dockrill 1991;

Goldberg 2017); and after 2001, in the *War on Terror* (see, for example, Berger 2002; Katzenstein 2003), which was important for both NATO and the development of the European security order and the EU. On December 5, 2022, Scholz (2022b) wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* titled “The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era”, where he proposes avoiding “the temptation to once again divide the world into blocs” and “making every effort to build new partnerships, pragmatically and without ideological blinders”. In the first GNSS (2023, 5 and 15), Scholz once again classifies “the world in the 21st century” as multipolar², primarily in terms of power shifting and systemic rivalry, which, officially, Germany (GNSS 2023, 49) tends to overcome through the promotion of a rules-based order, multilateralism, and new partnerships with those countries that do not share all the same values as Germany but are committed to the same aim. The *Zeitenwende*, thus, although about change, actually confirms the character of German security policy, this time through stronger German engagement in systemic rivalry as part of a transatlantic alliance and the European Union.

On the issue of foreign policy certainties, or the pillars of the German foreign and security policy, the MSC Report defined them as the change in the transatlantic community after the election of Donald Trump, more restrained US policy towards European security and international institutions in general, the US pivot to Asia, and the return of great power politics with the rise of China and a more assertive Russia (MSC 2020, 11). This report is certainly also a continuation of the 2019 theme of the MSC “The Great Puzzle: Who will pick up the pieces?” and the 2014 German President Gauck MSC speech, which also marked the ongoing change in the international order and formed what was later termed the “Munich consensus”.³ During these uncertain and shifting times, Germany was more committed to diplomacy than military solutions. However, the need for change in response to new security challenges has become more nuanced. For example, the German Minister of Defence Christine Lambrecht (BMVG 2022a) said in September 2022 that with caution alone and

² The 2023 Strategy uses the term “multipolar(ity)” four times and systemic rivalry seven times to describe the emerging world order and international relations. This is in compliance with the EU Strategic Compass (2022), which mentioned a “contested multipolar world” three times and rivalry among great powers four times. The other main external source of influence, the NATO Strategic Concept (2022), does not use the term multipolar to describe the current world order, nor the term “rivalry”, but “strategic”/“global”/“geopolitical competition” instead.

³ “Munich consensus” signifies a Germany that is ready to assume “more responsibility” internationally and to act “earlier, more decisively and more substantially.” (MSC 2020, 12). It called for even greater coordination with France in fulfilling a “European imperative”, i.e., strengthening Europe in order to defend German and European interests and creating a “sovereign Europe” (MSC 2020, 12).

simply invoking the established traditions of post-war Germany, Germany will not be able to ensure its security in the future and thus have to recognise military security, which has nothing to do with the armed forces in the Third Reich, as a key task of this country. For Puglierin (2022), thus, the *Zeitenwende* brought the abandonment of the idea of the so-called European peace dividend, in which Germany acted as a civilian power, despite its increasing participation in out-of-area military operations, and believed in the beneficial and democratising effects of economic interdependence “with autocracies such as Russia and China.” Besides the fear of losing its position in the EU and NATO and new division lines in Europe, the proximity and threat perception of the German people have also influenced the new German security response. In a January 2022 poll, more than half of German respondents claimed that Russia’s stance on Ukraine posed a large military threat to their country (Krastev and Leonard 2022).

The *Zeitenwende*, thus, provided an appropriate framework for the strengthening of German security and defence positions and roles since it was brought into proximity with the German strategic culture developing after the Second World War. This involves the relationship with Russia and China, the use of force, military capabilities, and arms exports, with a new focus on winning through competition and balancing challengers rather than transforming them from within. This adaptation of German security policy resolves the ever-present dilemma of allies: whether a united Germany will pursue a more independent or alliance-committed foreign, security, and defence policy, preserves the German role and influence in the Alliance, and presents it as a reliable partner and an ally. However, on the global level, the *Zeitenwende* actually contributes to the “contestation” moment of multipolarity, thus making Germany more embedded in the great powers’ competition.

Germany’s security policy before the *Zeitenwende*: Europe in peace

This part of the paper will examine the strategic documents of Germany in the field of security and defence prior to February 24, 2022, according to four variables that are main parts of security strategies: the German strategic environment, the character of a security and defence policy, the perception of threat, and a response. A strategic environment refers to the perception of German surroundings, world order, or external conditions under which the security policy is formulated. It is the realm in which the leadership interacts with other states or actors to advance the well-being of the state (Yarger 2006, 17). National security and defence policy comprises the overall positioning of the state towards the strategic environment and includes values, interests, and

approaches to best resolve the perceived threats and challenges. Security threats refer to other states or processes that are perceived to endanger the life, freedom, and future of the state, its population, and its responses. Here, they refer to concrete steps and measures that Germany has taken and will take in order to address the main threats.

Strategic environment

During the Cold War and more than two decades into the post-Cold War era, the German military was based on territorial defence, conscription, and the “citizens in uniform” concept, which meant strong civil-military relations and subordination of the military to political leadership instead of becoming a “state within a state”. Until the 1990s, the use of military force was concentrated around deterrence and defence in the case of aggression on German or NATO allies’ territory or a nuclear threat, with the primary focus on the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the new security environment, Germany was faced with the need to adapt its posture to a new strategic environment and threats, as well as to serve a new NATO role and commitments in out-of-area, crisis management, and peacekeeping operations. It then combined the territorial defence and conscription doctrines with new roles and methods of response, such as military interventions and operations, where the UN and multilateral missions were acceptable (1991–1999) but problematic regarding US unilateralism and preventive actions and coalitions of willing military actions after 2001.

The changed strategic environment at the beginning of the 1990s called for the reform of the military in order to develop rapid reaction forces, forces that would be engaged in new forms of missions (conflict prevention and crisis management) in the context of the new role of NATO. The political unification of Europe and the transatlantic alliance and friendship with the United States of America were the main drivers of German security policy. However, these changes did not immediately take place in Germany for several reasons: (1) the unification of Germany and two armies and the new role of the *Bundeswehr*; (2) the immediate security environment, i.e., neighbours; and (3) the nuclear weapons status, i.e., extended deterrence and the role of the US.

The main Soviet concern in that period was how to preserve the balance of power in Europe with a united Germany and the future of the alliances. The key US, UK, and German neighbours’ concerns were how to preserve Germany as a peaceful and democratic country, while the key German concern was how to overcome the challenges of unification and preserve the stability on its new border in a new security environment (Kostić 2019, 507-508). The solution was found in the multilateral embedment of Germany, border, friendship, and

cooperation agreements with neighbours and their involvement in Western institutions, as well as the downsizing of the German army together with its denunciation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (WP 1994, Chapter I). Reunited Germany has confined the definitive nature of its borders to the *Two Plus Four* agreement of September 12, 1990, and to the treaty signed with Poland on September 14, 1990. But the reunification of Germany was more of a process than a single task to be completed after the signing of *The Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany*. One of the issues to be settled was the creation of one Army from two previously enemy armies of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Welle* 2005). The ceiling determined by the Final agreement for Germany and the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) was set at 370,000 military personnel, and it was not an easy task to complete. Despite the need to downsize and reform the *Bundeswehr*, the preservation of universal conscription was justified on several grounds. First of all, it was the socialisation and familiarisation of the members of the former National People's Army with the *Bundeswehr* and the preservation of the traditional embeddedness of the Armed Forces in society. The WP 1994 (point 517) stated that the *Bundeswehr* would remain a conscript army on historical-political, security-related, social, and military grounds. It was described as a part of defence culture, a personal share of the responsibility for protecting one person's polity, and an expression of the consciousness of their common responsibility for the polity. It also ensured that the armed forces obtained all the personnel they needed, since "the size of the armed forces contributes to Germany's political might in Europe and the alliances and is at the same time a factor of stability" (WP 1994). Although the territorial defence principle was abandoned in 2003 in favour of expeditionary crisis management and prevention as part of the *War on Terror*, mandatory conscription was suspended only after 2011. The main goal of the military reform was to professionalise the troops and reduce the size of the *Bundeswehr*. The German army now consists only of career soldiers and long-term contract troopers (Pieper 2023).

Regarding the immediate security environment, i.e., neighbours, with the unification of Germany and the Warsaw Pact dissolution, Germany has got new kinds of neighbours. It was no longer a frontline state directed towards the hostile Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact members, but a frontline state towards the new instability. In order to mitigate the sense of security of the German state and society and get a favourable environment for reform, Germany had to conclude an agreement with Poland and then seek NATO enlargement. Allies around its border downplayed the need for territorial defence in Germany. The enlargement of NATO in the 1990s was thus mainly driven by German security concerns rather than US security interests for the

European security order after the Cold War (see also Tewes 2002, 163). After all, it was German Defence Minister Rühle, a great proponent of NATO enlargement in 1993, who first “opined that ‘accession is not so much a question of Whether, but of How and When.’” (quoted according to Tewes 2002, 165) and not the US president Bill Clinton, as is usually stated (see, for example, Goldgeier 2002).

The third point, nuclear weapons status, highlights that, differently from France and the UK, which underwent great military reforms at that time under their nuclear arsenals, Germany was the one to renounce the manufacture, possession, and control over WMD. While these two countries could, in the final instances, count on nuclear deterrence to avoid aggression, Germany had to rely on territorial defence and conventional forces, despite the US nuclear umbrella.

A Policy: determinants, interests, principles, and approach

German strategic documents distinguish constants (“long-term conditions”) and variables (“changing interests”) that determine this country’s security and defence policy. The constants are Germany’s geographical location at the heart of Europe and historical experience, as well as worldwide integration as a trading and industrialised nation, and international obligations arising from German membership in international regimes, especially the EU, NATO, the OSCE, and the UN. Other changing conditions are developments in geographically remote regions, insofar as they affect German interests (WP 2006, 20). The Defence Policy Guidelines 2003 (10) mention several determinants of German defence policy: multinational integration focused on European integration, transatlantic partnership, and global responsibility; the changed operational spectrum of the *Bundeswehr* and the increased number of international operations; as well as available resources for national defence and coping with asymmetric threats, including terrorism.

German strategic documents characterise security policy as foresighted, integrated, and comprehensive, as well as multilaterally interlinked and, in WP 2016, as global and sustainable. Foresighted policy means preventing crises and conflicts by taking preventive measures, so this policy is also preventive. The integrated policy comprises the foreign, security, economic, technological, environmental, and development policies as a whole. Thus, a comprehensive security policy must tackle the roots of conflicts, if possible, before they assume a military dimension and include diplomatic, economic, development, and, if necessary, military means for conducting armed operations. A comprehensive policy cannot be shaped by one country alone within a national framework, which is why German security policy is multilaterally interlinked or networked (WP 1994, point 309). Germany is strongly embedded in the UN, the EU

(previously also the WEU), NATO, and the OSCE, and “each of these organisations has its particular strengths, and the intention is for them to complement each other and be used flexibly” (WP 1994, point 401). Germany has been committed to the strengthening of UN peacekeeping capabilities and has also been concerned with UN Security Council reform in order to get new members, including Germany. It is an endeavour stated in all German white papers. Also, the new role of NATO led to the 1994 Constitutional Court Ruling permitting German troops to operate outside the NATO area in order to carry out UN Security Council decisions or actions under direct UN authority. In 2016, the German security policy was described as global, a term that can be aligned with the influence of the EU Global Strategy adopted the same year, and included space and cyber domains (WP 2016, 56). The same document stated that Germany was developing sustainable security, which means “interlinking the security of states, individuals, and successive generations as well as the many different areas that development and security have in common” (WP 2016, 56).

The *Bundeswehr* was considered to be one of the instruments of German foreign and security policy and comprised several principles: territorial defence was one of the principles of the organisation until 2003, while universal conscription continued to exist until 2011. Defence policy guidelines 2011 (14) stated: “The conscription of young men into basic military service has been rendered unnecessary by the current security situation. This represents a watershed (*Einschnitt*) in the history of the *Bundeswehr*.” *Innere Führung* is another basic principle of the internal order of the *Bundeswehr*, which is usually defined as moral leadership and civic education, aimed at “instilling in the soldier a high level of ‘thinking obedience’” in order to reduce the difference between the members of the *Bundeswehr* as soldiers and as citizens (Longhurst 2004, 42). Alliance solidarity is also a “fundamental principle” of German governance, including defence policy.

Internally, the 2011 Defence Policy Guidelines document defines the defence policy as part of the whole-of-government approach to security. The 2016 WP (48) characterises the whole-of-government approach as protecting the sovereignty and integrity of German territory and German citizens and rescuing German nationals in emergency situations abroad, which also means intensifying cooperation between government bodies, citizens, and the private sector. Overall, German security and defence policy tried to grasp every possible challenge through the broad process of formulation and react preventively and comprehensively, as well as in the context of multilateralism.

***Threat and response: asymmetric threats, crisis prevention,
and conflict resolution***

In 1994 WP (point 313), Russia was perceived as an especially important partner for lasting stability in Europe and the world, but both relations with Ukraine and Russia played a crucial role, and Germany supported the Partnership for Peace project, including these two countries in it. On the other side, against thousands of Russian warnings that this country is not satisfied with the way NATO transformation is taking place and its enlargement, the Alliance members and Ukraine have been conducting an intensified dialogue on accession issues. The WP 2006 (54) repeats the special role of Russia for European security, respecting its mutual history, size, population, nuclear and UNSC permanent status, and partnership in energy and economy. It even stated that without Russia, security, stability, integration, and prosperity in Europe could not be guaranteed.

In this period of special importance was the German cooperation with the US and France on the one hand and Russia and Ukraine on the other. The German 1994 WP (point 230) stated:

“With a total force strength of around two million servicemen, Russia would also be the largest military power in Europe and, at the same time, a global nuclear power. Given this military potential, Russia must create confidence – above all by taking action itself - especially *vis-à-vis* its neighbour. A concept of spheres of influence would be incompatible with this”.

But the question that remains is: Did the enlargement of the EU and NATO actually mean the spreading of the Western “sphere of influence” with an exclusive character? For example, despite outruling the concept of spheres of influence for Russia, the German objective was to tie the states of Eastern Europe as closely as possible to Western structures by pursuing a policy marked by cooperation and integration (WP 1994, point 232).

However, in this period, Russia and the West were not perceived as enemies, and other threats took precedence. They were perceived in concentric circles. The main security threat was coming from the new instability on German borders, with its new Eastern neighbours going through a severe crisis and the process of political and economic transition. In the larger neighbourhood, in the Balkans, raged a new instability that threatened Germany: the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1991-1995 period and the Kosovo crisis, including the bombings of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. For Hyde-Price, this represents one of two watersheds in German foreign and security policy since it was the first time after 1945 that the *Bundeswehr* was engaged in “offensive military operations against a sovereign state” (Hyde-Price 2000, 5). These crises were supposed to be stabilised in a sustainable manner through intervention

and integration. After September 11, 2001, the fight against various asymmetrical threats such as weak states and international terrorism, especially when combined with the proliferation of WMD and the means of their delivery, became the main threat. Instability in Africa and the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, together with the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East, brought the special challenge of migration.

Responses to these threats were found in something called “Effective crisis management” and “effective multilateralism”. It calls for the capability to react quickly and in a multilateral format. Germany was especially committed to enhancing UN peacekeeping powers. In 2006, besides the primary tasks of the *Bundeswehr*, there were also international conflict prevention and crisis management tasks, including the fight against international terrorism and the support of allies (WP 2006). In 2016, the WP (56) defined instruments as agile and flexible in dealing with known and unforeseeable threats in both design and application, resilient to direct attacks and indirect influence. Also, the US, NATO, and the strong EU were constantly seen as indispensable actors in coping with the main threats. Additionally, Germany was a promoter of “effective sanctions” that should respond to violations of internationally set rules and norms and strengthen international criminal prosecution and jurisdiction. In 2017, Germany adopted “Policy Guidelines: Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace” (Federal Government of Germany 2017), an overall inter-ministerial concept for dealing with international crises and armed conflicts, with the primacy of civilian over military means in solving conflicts and the high significance of crisis prevention. Now, within the *Zeitenwende*, has the time come for the primacy of the military over the civilian response to the main threats?

The *Zeitenwende* and the first German National Security Strategy: Europe at War

Having in mind all that has been previously written, it seems like the significant *Zeitenwende* for Germany in the security domain will finally be the adoption of a security strategy by the Social-Democrat-led government (with the Minister of Defence also coming from the SPD). When the first WP on security policy in the post-Cold War era was adopted, the Minister of Defence was Volker R  he (CDU). In 2006 and 2016, the ministers were Franz Josef Jung and Ursula von der Leyen, both from the CDU. The only strategic document that was adopted by the SPD Minister after 1990 was the Defence Policy Guidelines 2003 under Minister Peter Struck. In the Guidelines, it was stated that the multiplicity of tasks required a consolidated national security policy with flexible and well-coordinated instruments, which must in the medium term be merged

into a “national security concept”. This practically announced the need for the adoption of a national security strategy, but it will be 20 years before the new SPD/Greens/Free Democrats government will actually do that. Besides this, three main points actually constitute a *Zeitenwende* in German security policy: new political and economic policies, including in the energy field; a relationship with Russia; a new approach to arms exports; and more resources devoted to military capability development.

The adoption of the first GNSS, scheduled for the first year of the new government, was part of a new German government coalition agreement (SPD, Alliance 90/Greens, and Free Democrats) formed in December 2021 (Coalition Agreement 2021, 114). In similarity with the 2016 WP, the road to this Strategy has also been part of the broader debate on the security policy of Germany. It included academia and researchers, national and international experts, as well as interested citizens. For example, the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin, which is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office, established the “+49security” project with the aim of debating the most important topics surrounding the National Security Strategy (+49security 2022). It comprised seven debates: on key priorities of the NSS, rethinking interdependence, the road to Strategy, crises abroad, capacity building, strengthening resilience, and the concept of security in a globalised world (+49security 2022). Besides, having in mind the multilateral, first of all, transatlantic and European character of the German security and defence policy, the strategic documents of the EU and NATO of the same year 2022 had an impact on the structure of the formation of the German NSS as well.

The new coalition government had planned to adopt the GNSS by the end of the first year of its mandate (the end of 2022), then by the 2023 Munich Security Conference, but it was finally adopted on June 14, 2023, under the title “Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany” (GNSS 2023). Some of the reasons for that outcome can be found in the debate between Scholz and the Greens’ Foreign Minister Baerbock over the issue of who should set the tone on German foreign policy, as well as weapons deliveries for Ukraine and the right approach to China (von der Burchard and Rinaldi 2023). In a structured interview conducted for the purpose of this research, Jakov Devčić (2023), director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation office for Serbia and Montenegro, singled out three main contested issues regarding the adoption of the NSS: spending 2% of the GDP on defence, the role of German federal units (*Länder*), and the position of the National Security Council (NSC). The issue of active cyber defence, or the so-called “hack backs”, was also one of the points of contention that eventually ended up like the NSC – omitted from the Strategy (Clasen 2023).

**Strategic environment:
between fears of an assertive Russia and the inert US**

The strategic environment in which the new German security strategy is formulated can be described as Europe at war. As the new Strategy put it, “Germany’s security environment is undergoing profound change, and we are living through a watershed era, a *Zeitenwende*” (GNSS 2023, 11). The German security interest continues to be shaped not only by its geographical location and membership in the EU and NATO but also by its “outward-looking and internationally integrated social market economy and our responsibility for our natural resources.” (GNSS 2023, 20). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is by itself defined as a *Zeitenwende*, a turning point after which nothing is going to be the same in international relations. Great power competition, with power shifting to the East, is described as a new reality. How to deal with the more assertive Russian politics became the main question for transatlantic leaders. Once again, in the past thirty years, Germany has been called upon to become a security provider. A stronger Germany should mean a stronger European pillar in NATO and a stronger EU. In this endeavour, both relations with the US and France are of paramount importance for Germany.

The new world is more competitive in terms of worldviews, with a lack of effectiveness of international institutions, more militarised, less cooperative and coordinated, a more divided Europe, and economically shaken. On the national German level, it represents the end of the post-World War II transition of Germany into a military capable, self-reliable, and determined country with more assertive security and defence policy and fewer market and resource dependency on “authoritarian states” such as Russia and China. In that vein, the German reorientation has been meant to increase its neighbours’, partners’, and friends’ trust in Germany and to show them that they can rely on Germany “as allies, as supporting nations, as comrades in arms” (BMVG 2022a). The German strategic environment is also defined by the US reorientation to the Pacific in order to, as perceived, defend a rules-based international order on which Germany has so much progressed. That means that Germany and its European allies must play a stronger military role, including supporting the military industry, to facilitate the US’s dealing with challenges in the Far East and provide for its own defence. In order to support nuclear sharing, Germany decided to purchase up to 35 *F35A* fighters, which are in the final stages of certification to become dual-capable aircraft whose most important role is to carry the US *B61-12* nuclear bombs and replace *Tornados* that are currently in service (Donald 2022).

Besides global rivalry among states, the GNSS considers the strategic environment to also be shaped by the wars, crises, and conflicts in Europe’s

neighbourhood — fragile states that might become a cradle and safe haven for terrorism, where extremism, organised crime, and illegal financial flows are on the rise. There is also a greater danger of cyberattacks and one-sided dependencies, as well as a climate crisis.

Policy: determinants, interests, principles, and approach

The first GNSS preserved the character of a comprehensive and whole-of-government approach to security, as well as being multilaterally oriented towards developing more interoperability with German European partners and NATO allies and equipping German forces to be ready to respond militarily if needed (BMVG 2022b). The basic words that characterise the new German security policy are robust, resilient, and sustainable. While robustness means strengthening the *Bundeswehr* and national and collective defence capabilities, resilience is mostly connected to the protection of German values and ways of life through the protection of democracy, international order, and human rights, the supply of energy, food, and medical chains, the critical infrastructure, and security in cyberspace and outer space. Sustainability mostly refers to the preservation of natural resources and fighting climate change, food insecurity, and possible pandemics. The novelty that this Strategy brings is the wide use of the term “feminist foreign and development policy”, which might be at odds with the insistence on the robustness of security and defence policy, including the greater arms exports to conflict regions.⁴ The debate about feminist foreign policy and the involvement of countries with such a foreign policy in conflicts and arms exports (especially Sweden and Canada) is widely spread, and with the determination of its foreign policy as feminist but also oriented towards the strengthening of the arms industry and export, Germany is entering this group of states.⁵ According to the new Strategy, Germany will adhere to its restrictive baseline arms export policy but will also take into account “alliance and security interests, the geostrategic situation, and the needs of enhanced European arms cooperation” (GNSS 2023, 15). The term that has mostly been used in connection with the GNSS is “integrated security”. In the Strategy, it is used twenty-eight times and is defined on several occasions. Overall, this policy means “the collaborative interaction of all relevant actors, resources, and instruments that, in combination, can comprehensively guarantee the security

⁴ Feminist foreign policy prioritises peace, gender equality, and environmental integrity together with the promotion and protection of human rights for all and seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures (Thompson et al. 2020, 4).

⁵ On the relation between feminist foreign policy and arms exports, see, for example: Vucetic 2017; Robinson 2021.

of our country and strengthen it against external threats” (GNSS 2023, 11). It combines preventative action with intervention and follow-up measures (GNSS 2023, 30).

In its approach to the war in Ukraine, Germany puts the blame on the Putin regime, trying to leave space for possible cooperation with Russia as an indispensable actor in the European security order. For now, as German President Steinmeier put it, “peace that rewards acts like this, a peace that seals Putin’s land grabs, is no peace”, and Germans must give up old ways of thinking about German-Russian relations (Quinville 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought some resolution to this issue. It was marked as a *Zeitenwende* and a “cut”, which brought an end to German restraint, gave defence spending priority over other government expenditures, and helped Ukraine with military equipment and weapons. According to Devčić (2023), this really was a revolutionary move for Germany, not only because of the decision to spend more on defence but also because of the historical memory of World War II regarding Russia. However, despite the initial division between those who immediately supported it and those more constrained regarding the sudden and unexpected Scholz’s turn, the CDU, as the main opposition party, decided to support it (Devčić 2023). Setting up a special 100 billion euro fund for the *Bundeswehr* was enshrined in the Constitution, which is why the support of major political parties in the Bundestag, especially the CDU, was important. Through this measure, the German government avoided cuts for other ministries, which would happen if the fund were from the current budget. By now, Germany has sent to Ukraine military equipment, tanks, artillery, and air-defence systems (including *Patriot*), antitank weapons, armoured troop carriers, anti-aircraft guns and missiles, and counterbattery radar systems, and is conducting training for up to 5,000 Ukrainian troops in Germany (Scholz 2022b). The *Zeitenwende* in German foreign and security policy also means that Germany will drop its long-standing position of changing states like Russia and China through trade and economy (*Wandel durch Handel*) and place more reliance on military means.

***Threat and response: Russia, global rivalry, and a robust, resilient,
and sustainable German response***

Since the 1990s, the turn in the perception of threats can be described as a 360-degree turn – from confronting possible aggression and nuclear weapons use, through conflict prevention, crisis management, and fighting against terrorism, back to the new great power competition, instead of bipolar, in a multipolar setting. Threats now include potential assaults on allied territory, cyberwarfare, and even the remote chance of a nuclear attack, which Putin has

not so subtly threatened (Scholz 2022b). While the new Strategy recognises China as “a partner, competitor, and systemic rival”, “today’s (emphasis added) Russia is for now the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area” (GNSS 2023, 11-12). It is the reason why national and collective defence is the core task of the *Bundeswehr*, with all other tasks subordinate to it (GNSS 2023, 32).

The official German view of the causes of the war in Ukraine has four layers. Firstly, it is marked as Putin’s war – a “war of choice” – “because Putin, not the Russian people, has decided to start this war” (GNSS 2023, 32). Secondly, the internal cause of this war is the preservation of Putin’s “oppressive regime”. Then there is a regional aspect; it is seen as Putin’s intention to build the Russian empire and establish the Russian sphere of influence in Europe through the use of force. Finally, on the global level, it is war with the aim of establishing a 19th-century model of great powers ruling the world. In that way, for Germany, the consequences of the war have an internal, regional, and global character; they are contesting democracy, the established security order in Europe and its unity, as well as the broader world order. By calling it a Putin’s war, Germany is putting the blame not on Russia as a whole but on that specific regime, thus recognising and leaving the prospect for future settlement with Putin’s successors.

The German response to the new threat posed by Russia and its moves towards the Ukrainian crisis is based on the belief that the only reason Ukraine still exists is not because of diplomacy or sanctions but because it can defend itself with military means provided by the West (BMVG 2022b). For Germany, Ukraine must win. In his “*Zeitenwende* speech”, Scholz announced five measures as the German response to the Russian war in Ukraine: (1) Support of Ukraine (including with weapons), (2) diverting Putin from the path of war (mainly through restrictive measures), (3) preventing Putin’s war from spilling over into other countries in Europe (through strengthening NATO collective defence), (4) New and strong capabilities for the *Bundeswehr*, enough to counter Russian capabilities and a secure energy supply, and (5) As much diplomacy as possible (Germany will not refuse talks with Russia) (Scholz 2022a). In response to the war in Ukraine, Germany has set aside its principle of not sending arms into conflict zones by sending lethal weapons to Ukraine (it was already done in 2014 by providing military help to Iraqi Kurds with weapons in their fight against the Islamic State). Germany is also no longer importing coal or gas from Russia.

The German response thus includes more arms production, development, and export, financial support for the *Bundeswehr*, and a show of force towards Russia. This involves strengthening NATO’s eastern flank, including a German military presence “on a more permanent basis” in Allied territory, stronger air defence capabilities, and the development of critical infrastructure. In response

to the war in Ukraine, Germany set aside its principle of not sending arms into conflict zones (it had already done so in 2014 by providing military help to Iraqi Kurds with weapons in their fight against the Islamic State). Germany is also no longer importing coal or gas from Russia. Besides, Germany will strengthen its security and defence industry's competitiveness and ability to engage in cooperation within the EU (GNSS 2023, 33) and promote the development and introduction of highly advanced capabilities in the cyberspace and outer space, as well as precision deep-strike weapons (GNSS 2023, 15-16, 34). As part of NATO, Germany undertook the commitment of spending 2% of its GDP on defence, 20% of which on major new equipment by 2024 (NATO 2023). The debate in Germany regarding the 2% pledge is a reflection of the ever-present dichotomy between the requirements of defence policy and the financial needs of other national tasks. Inside the Government, the greater spending on defence was mostly challenged by the Greens because of their traditionally suspicious position on the armaments industry. They wanted to create more flexibility as defence spending may vary over the years and raise spending for soft power measures on a scale similar to the defence budget (von der Burchard and Rinaldi 2023). Regarding opposition parties, the Left and Alternative for Deutschland condemned the announced increase in military spending, considering it to be involvement in an arms race (von der Burchard and Rinaldi 2023).

Although not even in 2023, the German minister of Defence Pistorius (2023) said that Germany would meet the NATO capability goals by 2025 and was strongly committed to the 2% pledge. The Federal Government reached a consensus on this issue to allocate 2% of GDP "as an average over a multi-year period", initially in part via the newly created special fund for the *Bundeswehr* but also to bolster investments in critical infrastructure protection, cyber capabilities, effective diplomacy, civil protection, stabilisation of German partners, humanitarian assistance, and development cooperation (GNSS 2023, 13). However, the most challenging issues, including the overall spending of 2% of the GDP on defence and 20% of that on new equipment, remain procurement procedures and the sustainability of investments that are going to be made.

Writing on the anniversary of the "*Zeitenwende* speech", Pieper (2023) assessed that the *Bundeswehr* was still lacking military equipment and qualified personnel, which spurred the debate of whether general conscription should be reintroduced. German Defence Minister Pistorius even said that it had been a mistake to suspend compulsory military service (Pieper 2023). However, there are no plans to return to conscription, but the *Bundeswehr* is adapting its structure by setting up the new Territorial Operations Command, which can be considered part of the 360-degree turn.

In the end, what was omitted from the Strategy, although a great issue of debate during the process of its formulation, was the creation of the National Security Council, which would be, among other things, responsible for the implementation of the Strategy. It was something that the CDU wanted to establish even earlier, especially after the chaotic withdrawal of US and other NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2021 (Devčić 2023). Since 2008, the CDU/CSU parliamentary group and various politically influential people have repeatedly proposed upgrading the existing Federal Security Council under the Chancellery, which deals almost exclusively with arms exports, to a national security council (Brockmeier 2021). However, although acceptable to both major German parties, during the discussion on the first NSS, the issue of the future placement of the NSC arose since the Greens consider the idea of a NSS under the Chancellery to be unacceptable, as it would create a “shadow foreign ministry”. In 2016 and 2017, this party even proposed the idea of establishing the “National Council for Peace and Sustainability” (Brockmeier 2021).

Besides the issue of the National Security Council, the Strategy left a lot of work to be done in the future. It mentions the adoption of more than ten new strategies and the redrafting of the Framework Guidelines for Overall Defence. This means that the Strategy was really based on the lowest common denominator. Moreover, by identifying the Strategy with the Federal Government by using too many times the phrase “Federal Government” instead of “Germany”, the Strategy looks like an expose of a current Government and raises the issue of its sustainability if the government changes.⁶

Conclusion

There are many phrases to describe changes occurring in the world order after 2014, one of them being the German word *Zeitenwende*. Whether it is a “turning point in history”, “epochal”, or “tectonic shift” in international relations, one thing is certain: the changes that are occurring are changes towards more conflictual and uncoordinated relations among several key actors in the international system, and they bring changes to other states’ foreign and security policies as well. This paper tried to grasp these changes at the global and national German levels and determine how they are interlinked.

⁶ In the first German National Security Strategy, the phrase “Federal Government” is used two hundred and fourteen times and the word “Germany” less than half of that amount (ninety times). In comparison, the British “Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy” uses the abbreviation “UK” around three and a half times more than the word “Government” (UK Integrated Review 2021).

In the case of Germany, although there were announcements of the *Zeitenwende* and the need for a more robust German security policy in the various security forums and among the former politicians after the Crimean crisis and Trump's presidency in the US, it took shape and became an official policy of the German government only after February 24, 2022, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This has sped up and put more pressure from the allies on Germany to cut off all ties with Russia (especially economic and energy dependency), further releasing its stance on arms exports, thus providing more military help to Ukraine, as well as more financial resources for the German armed forces, and showing commitment to the NATO 2% pledge. In this regard, the *Zeitenwende* presents: (1) the contested multipolarisation of world order and shift in power among great powers, (2) a linchpin between the transatlantic demands in such an environment and German internal conditions, which requires cross-party consensus and the proximity of threat, (3) the confirmation of German security and defence identity as transatlantic and multilateral, thus more involved in systemic rivalry and less dependent on other "poles" of world order, (4) final deadlock of the policy of Western institutions enlargement together with Russian cooperation, cutting the energy dependency, holding the European division line and Russian geopolitical interests away from German borders and spreading the European security order as wide as possible, and (5) the evolution of German military capabilities and restoration of its military industry and arms exports, including greater military support for Ukraine but also all around the world, which might trigger new arms races.

In order to come to this conclusion, this article analysed and compared German strategic documents and stances before and after February 24, 2022, in four aspects: strategic environment, security policy, perceived threats, and response. Regarding the strategic environment, the analysis shows that there has been an almost 360-degree change since the Cold War: from the conflictual bipolar world order between the US and USSR, through the rise of the globalised and interdependent world, to the new polarised and unstable multipolar world order. This systemic setting has influenced the German security policy, which has remained foresighted, integrated, comprehensive, networked, and multilateral, with a whole-of-government approach to its formulation and implementation, but reoriented to tackle the new kind of threats. These threats are now again determined to be symmetric (possible aggression and nuclear threats) and coming from the East, although not on German borders. The multilateral character of German foreign policy, together with a tendency to create a more polarised world order, created decisive pressure on Germany to cut its ties with Russia, lower its interdependence on Russia and China in the economic and energy fields, diverge from the long-standing position on arms exports, and rearm itself.

These changes are now collected in a single document, the first National Security Strategy. Adoption of this Strategy was part of the Coalition agreement from December 2021, and it was first announced to be published by the end of the first year of the mandate, then before the MSC in February 2023, but finally adopted on June 14, 2023. The article provided some details about the obstacles to the adoption of this Strategy as planned, and they are mostly connected with the German domestic political climate and system. They involve the disputes between the SPD and Greens regarding the 2% pledge, the division of labour or competencies regarding natural disaster response management between the Federal and *Länder* levels, and the position and competencies of the National Security Council.

The first German National Security Strategy is not a finished job, since a lot of work is still ahead of the German government, both in terms of creating a favourable free, open, and rules-based international order and creating more robust, resilient, and sustainable capabilities. The *Zeitenwende* provided the long-awaited framework for these two to come together, thus determining the direction of German security policy for the next decades.

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ZEITENWENDE И ПОЛИТИКА НЕМАЧКЕ НАЦИОНАЛНЕ БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ: АНАЛИЗА ПРВЕ СТРАТЕГИЈЕ НАЦИОНАЛНЕ БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ

Апстракт: Предмет овог рада је концептуализација немачког појма *Zeitenwende* као „прекретнице у историји” која је кулминирала руском инвазијом на Украјину 2022. године и првом немачком стратегијом националне безбедности. У раду се испитује да ли је и како глобални *Zeitenwende* променио немачку безбедносну и одбрамбену политику кроз четири варијабле: стратешко окружење, карактер безбедносне политике, перципиране претње и одговоре. Ова промена се испитује коришћењем концепта промене у међународним односима и метода историјске и анализе садржаја, као и компаративних метода. Структурирани интервју се такође користи за прикупљање релевантних података. Ауторка закључује да *Zeitenwende*, с једне стране, потврђује идентитет немачке безбедносне политике као трансатлантске и мултилатералне, као и интересе као што су већи и прихваћенији утицај унутар НАТО-а, држање европске линије поделе и руских геополитичких интереса даље од немачких граница и ширење европског безбедносног поретка што је шире могуће. С друге стране, *Zeitenwende* доприноси даљој еволуцији немачке безбедносне политике, ослобађајући је од коначних ограничења Другог светског рата. Ипак, за разлику од превазилажења, *Zeitenwende* снажније укључује Немачку у глобално системско ривалство, чинећи је мање зависном од других „полова” светског поретка, фокусираном на такмичење са изазивачима уместо покушаја да их промени изнутра.

Кључне речи: *Zeitenwende*; немачка безбедносна и одбрамбена политика; мултиполарни светски поредак; руско-украјински рат.