

Germany and the Baltic Sea Region

By Marcel Hadeed and Monika Sus

The security of the Baltic Sea region (BSR) has gained importance for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Germany in the past decade, even prior to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since 2014, the Russian Federation has waged continuous political warfare against its neighbors. Actions include the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass region, as well as ongoing disinformation campaigns, cyber attacks, and violations of air and maritime spaces. The BSR is a preferred target of these attacks and provocations, and as attacks on the cyber infrastructure of the German Bundestag in 2015¹ and the infamous “Lisa” disinformation campaign in 2016² have shown, neither Germany’s size nor its comparatively good relations with Russia guarantees Berlin’s security from Russian political warfare.

In fact, the database *euvdisinformation.eu*—a flagship project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force—has counted more than 700 cases of Russian disinformation against Germany since 2015—by far the most of any European Union (EU) member state.³ The campaigns attempt to portray an image of “Russophobia” in Germany and Germany’s avoidance of dialogue.⁴

Two prominent examples of Russian disinformation activity against Germany stand out. When the German battalion deployed as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) mission in Lithuania in February 2017, Russian outlets targeted them in an information campaign, likening their presence to the Nazi occupation,⁵ alleging the presence of a Russian agent among German troops, and the raping of a teenage girl by a German commander. In 2019, the battalion was targeted again with allegations of the desecration of a Jewish cemetery by a German tank.

The Russians used a different approach during the German federal elections of 2017, when German-speaking Russian outlets attempted to galvanize support for the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland by discrediting Germany’s immigration policy and thereby exacerbating political polarization.⁶ The Russian troll factory Internet Research Agency was also active on social media and infiltrated partisan networks.⁷

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Neither campaign was particularly effective, and Germany remains a difficult target. Germany has a lower social media penetration rate than the United States, while the public media landscape is trusted and centrist.⁸ As a result, political fallout from both attacks remained limited and did not fundamentally alter Germany's policies toward Russia.

Neither is the German public particularly worried about Russian aggression. In a 2019 survey by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, only 15 percent of respondents viewed Russia as a threat. A more open question to rank potential "enemies" paradoxically sees the United States (39 percent) far ahead of Russia (15 percent) while 60 percent of respondents desired more cooperation with Russia.⁹ According to a survey by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in August 2022, only 22 percent of respondents viewed Russia as a major threat to Germany, whereas 50 percent perceived it as a minor threat. Twenty-five percent of respondents saw no threat from Russia at all.¹⁰

Germany's role in BSR security is significant: it is the largest and most powerful country of the region, both economically and politically. However, the BSR has "never been a priority in Berlin" since World War II.¹¹ Germany's Baltic coastline is merely 964 km long (out of 6,103 km of total borders) and has only two (out of nine total) neighbors in the region: Poland and Denmark. Germany conceives of itself as a Central European country. Accordingly, Germany pays less attention to the BSR than the other Baltic Sea states.

This article analyzes German policy toward the BSR after 1990 by reflecting on both political doctrine and Berlin's involvement in providing security in this region. Although Germany does not have an explicit strategy toward the BSR, it is possible to gauge a comprehensive picture of German strategy and efforts in the region using strategic documents from the Federal Ministry of Defense (MoD) to trace the German approach toward Russia and the BSR mainly through the lens of Germany's Russia policy. The German political elite believe that Germany

has a "special role"¹² to play in maintaining dialogue and building trust with Russia and this shapes key security policy decisions regarding the BSR. The ministry periodically publishes white papers and defense guidelines, which outline priorities in defense policy based on an elaboration of its threat perception. White papers were published in 1994, 2003, 2006, 2011, and 2016.

German Political Doctrine and the Eastern Partners

Working Toward a Eurasian Vision: 1990 to 2014

Reunited Germany sought good relations with Russia, which it viewed as an "important element for the future European security and stability system."¹³ As Russia made tentative steps toward integrating into the liberal international system, Germany saw internal strife and conflict in former satellite states as the main threat to regional stability, while the relationship was one of optimistic engagement. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the 1997 Permanent Joint Council (later the NATO-Russia Council) were vehicles to integrate Russia into the international and European communities.

Although Germany lacked a distinct BSR strategy, its overall strategy was defined by the broader guidelines of foreign and security policy with two poles: an unwavering commitment to NATO and the vision of security through integration and cooperation.¹⁴ The United States remained its most important security partner. Under the U.S. security umbrella, Germany significantly reduced the size of the Bundeswehr from 476,288 troops in 1991 to 177,800 troops in 2017.¹⁵ Germany saw integration into European and transatlantic cooperation as vital for the nascent democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, including in the BSR, and focused on extensive civilian cooperation to support the Baltic States and Poland in that transition.¹⁶

Germany cultivated extensive bilateral cooperation with Poland. Within the framework of the Weimar Triangle and beyond, German-Polish cooperation has resulted in tangible results like the 1997 launch of Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC-N) in Szczecin, Poland.

Relations with the Baltics were more ambiguous. On one hand, German officials expressed feelings of responsibility toward them;¹⁷ like Poland, the Baltics were victims of the Ribbentrop-Molotov-Pact. Because of this history, Germany advocated for the Baltics, including support for their integration into the EU. Berlin was less enthusiastic about NATO accession. As experts noted, “German-Baltic relations were . . . overshadowed by Russo-German relations.”¹⁸ Chancellors Helmut Kohl and later Gerhard Schröder carefully weighed Moscow’s reaction to the expansion of the Western security structure into the Baltics, leading to ambiguous policies toward security in the BSR. Part of securing Russian support for German reunification was assurances by American and German diplomats that NATO would not expand eastward.¹⁹ Accordingly, Germany remained on the fence regarding Baltic state NATO membership. If it were up to Germany then, intensive civil and economic cooperation, including with Russia, would have provided for the security needs of the Baltics while not alienating Russia. In the end, Germany endorsed NATO membership for the Baltics in 2002.²⁰

At the same time, and up to 2014, Germany expended a great deal of energy in establishing cooperation with Moscow, such as the 2010 Partnership for Modernization initiative. As the respective foreign ministers stated at the time:

“Today our relations rest on a solid and broad foundation: our economic ties have acquired an intensity unknown in earlier times. The cultural exchanges, the intensive political dialogue and, not least, the numerous contact points in civil society

bear witness to close relations based on a spirit of trust. . . . Germany and Russia work closely together on global security issues. Comprehensive, indivisible and cooperative security, stability and prosperity are amongst our common aims.”²¹

Neither the crisis in Chechnya in 2004 nor the Russian cyber operation against Estonia in 2007 or Russian operations against Georgia in 2008 profoundly changed this ambition. In 2012, the German foreign minister postulated that “we cannot solve the challenges of our time without, much less against, but only together with a great nation like Russia.”²² In 2013, in response to Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich’s refusal to sign the EU association agreement, Chancellor Angela Merkel called for more dialogue with Russia to escape the either/or trap for Eastern countries to choose between the EU or Russia.²³ Germany saw this as continuing the tradition of cooperation established by the Helsinki Accords, Russia’s signing of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the NATO-Russia Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security.

In the absence of a dedicated strategy toward the BSR, a cooperative Euro-Russian security structure provided the framework for German policy toward the region. A strategic partnership between NATO and Russia remained Germany’s long-term objective.²⁴ Although the concept is compelling, it depends on Russia accepting and adhering to the territorial inviolability and sovereignty of its neighbors.

Strategic Turning Point

Germany fundamentally altered its security policy at the turn of 2013 and 2014. In the face of a crisis in Ukraine, a triad of top German officials pledged at the 2014 Munich Security Conference that Germany would take on more responsibility in the

international arena.²⁵ When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, it profoundly transformed threat perceptions across Europe, and particularly in the BSR, incentivizing increased German engagement.

The current German strategy is most clearly defined in the MoD's 2016 White Book on Security Policy and the Future of the German Armed Forces²⁶ and the outgoing government's 2018 coalition agreement. The strategy reflects the view that Russia's present "policy of aggression"²⁷ threatens the current international and European security order and the BSR constitutes a particularly exposed region. Germany ceased advocating for outright partnership with Russia: future cooperation remains a long-term objective, but first the conditions for such cooperation need to be re-established. This means an end to Russian violations of international law. Chancellor Merkel stated that international relations must be built not on the law of the strong but on the strength of law.²⁸ The question is how Russia could be compelled to respect the fundamental principles of international law in Europe.

First, it must be noted that Germany emphasizes a comprehensive policy mix, of which defense policy is only one part. Sustainable solutions to international conflicts can only ever be political. Accordingly, Germany follows a multi-pronged approach to achieve security in the BSR by combining increased collective security and resilience *against* and cooperative security and sectoral cooperation *with* Russia.²⁹ The Foreign and Defense Ministries emphasized the former and the Chancellery the latter.³⁰

Increasing collective security and resilience depends on increased international cooperation. It is no coincidence that, in a speech in 2019, outgoing German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer recalled the German Basic Law, which bestows on Germans the "determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe."³¹ Her tenure would continue the emphasis

on multilateralism that has become a hallmark of German security and defense policy initiatives over the years.

More specifically, under the slogan "remaining transatlantic and becoming more European,"³² the outgoing German government agreed to strengthen both its own defensive capabilities and budget while simultaneously enhancing European cooperation and capabilities. Indeed, Germany has not only signaled its willingness to approximate NATO's 2 percent commitment but also increased its defense spending by 10 percent between 2018 and 2019, the largest increase among the top 15 military spenders.³³ At 1.3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), defense spending remains far from the 2 percent that was promised at the NATO Wales Summit in 2014. While it dipped slightly in 2020, Germany planned an expansion in 2021, boosted also by the government's COVID-19 stimulus package.³⁴ Unfortunately, this level of spending is insufficient to remedy low readiness rates regarding German equipment, such as submarines, military aircraft, and tanks.

It is nonetheless noteworthy that the question of military spending, and in particular the 2 percent commitment, remains hotly contested even among the governing coalition of the center-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and center-left Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). In particular, the government questions the utility of a GDP-anchored indicator to resist more forceful attempts to reach the agreed on goalpost.³⁵ Although the SPD/Green/Free Democrat coalition agreement does not address the 2 percent goal, it does state that that it will "subject personnel, material and finances to a critical inventory," will improve the equipment of the soldiers and the Bundeswehr, will "procure a successor system for the Tornado fighter aircraft, . . . and will enable the arming of Bundeswehr drones."³⁶ Because the new Chancellor Olaf Scholtz was both Merkel's Vice Chancellor and the former

coalition government finance minister, we may expect no major change in policy or resourcing for the military.

Even with the burden of high overall but low percentage of GDP spending, Germany reiterates its willingness to provide leadership within the Alliance.³⁷ This willingness is reflected in its leadership of the eFP battalion in Lithuania and the extensive supporting role it overtook in the initial phase of the DEFENDER-EUROPE 20 exercise.

At the same time, Germany prioritizes enhancing European capabilities, both within NATO (the “European Pillar”) and without. Germany actively promotes the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework for defensive integration and underlines its complementarity to NATO. Yet a closer look at the projects suggests a lack of vision for the security of the BSR. Only the military mobility project features all European members in the BSR (except for Denmark). Of eight projects that Germany coordinated in November 2021, only two involve Poland and one Lithuania. PESCO initiatives led by Germany confirm Berlin’s prioritization of the improvement of European synergies—and thus interoperability, research and development, procurement, standardization, and certification.³⁸ They reflect Germany’s doctrine of “military reluctance.” Accordingly, any European response also encapsulates non-military measures as demonstrated by Germany’s hardened stance on sanctions against Russia in 2014³⁹ and its active coordination.⁴⁰

Germany also pursues increasing resilience against hybrid warfare beyond the framework of the EU. It participates in the Northern Group, which brings together the Nordic and Baltic countries with the United Kingdom, Poland, the Netherlands, and Germany to informally consult on security and defense matters. It has also changed its stance on the “Three Seas” (Adriatic, Baltic, and Black) Initiative. Additionally, Germany is actively engaged in bilateral defense cooperation with partners in the BSR.



Thus, the first prong of German policy toward the BSR—increasing security against Russian activity—is conducted with a focus on concerted international action in NATO, the EU, and through bilateral cooperation, all supported by a general increase in defense spending. These efforts are moderated by the second prong of a cooperative stance toward Russia.

Russia Seen as an Indispensable Partner

Despite condemning Russian aggression, prior to February 2022 Germany still viewed Russia as an indispensable partner in global security questions. Germany saw the potential of long-term strategic partnerships among itself, NATO, and Russia, if it is based on the current European security structure. This was German foreign policy during the entire Schroder and Merkel chancellorships and at the beginning of the current Olaf Scholtz chancellorship that started on December 8, 2021. Within 2½ months, Scholtz had to deal with an unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. He was clear that Germany thought this was a violation of international law and initiated a wide variety of actions to support Ukraine and prepare Germany, including a €100 billion special fund for the Bundeswehr to make up for deferred maintenance and an additional deployment to Lithuania as part of the eFP.⁴¹

In accordance with its overarching insistence on the inviolability of international agreements and principles, Germany has long remained unwaveringly committed to the NATO-Russia Founding Act. As such it has upheld the commitment not to carry out collective defense missions that would exceed the threshold of “substantial combat forces” based in former Warsaw Pact countries.⁴² Some interpret this as the permanent stationing of a maximum of three brigades, while others believe that Russian actions have abrogated the agreement.⁴³ As Judy Dempsey claimed in 2017, “Germany in particular remains unwilling to review the act, and there is silence in the alliance about other options.”⁴⁴

An example of Germany’s unwavering attempts at forging a durable relationship with Russia is the controversy surrounding the Nord Stream II pipeline, which Germany finished, despite risking U.S. sanctions⁴⁵ and the harsh criticism of European neighbors.⁴⁶ Germany remained committed to the pipeline even after the Russian Federal Security Service attempted to assassinate and subsequently

imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, despite the fact that Navalny’s poisoning generated significant publicity, not least because he was treated and recovered in Berlin. As argued in one of Germany’s most popular daily newspapers (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), “Nord Stream 2 was the symbol of German-Russian special relations, an intricate mixture of economics, politics, and sentiment.”⁴⁷ The project was abandoned only after Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022.⁴⁸

Until February 2022, there were two competing narratives in Germany regarding Russia. The first narrative treated Moscow as an indispensable economic and security partner, while the second recognized Russia’s aggressive policies as a challenge to European security. The latter argument has gained ground since the events of 2014 and has been reinforced since February 2022. However, the debate about the threat from Russia remains abstract for most Germans, and only a minority fear Russian aggression.⁴⁹ This is clear from survey results in August 2022, in which 75 percent of respondents in Germany viewed Russia as “no” or only a “minor threat.” This will probably remain so if Germany has a Polish buffer zone between itself and Russia.

These competing narratives are mirrored in the approach to the question of how to end the war in Ukraine and the consequences it will have for Russia. Whereas most Central and East European countries and most of the U.S. political elite claim that there is no conceivable common ground on which Western values and interests could meet the Russian leader’s goals, Germany is more reluctant on this front. Some among Germany’s political elite argue that the West (and Ukraine) should end the war through diplomatic means and agree to territorial concessions to Russia in order not to humiliate Vladimir Putin. Also, once the war is over, they believe Germany should return to buying Russian gas.⁵⁰ Despite the war many Germans believe Putin’s propaganda: in October 2022, one-fifth of survey



Angela Merkel criticized the United States's sanctions against Russia that target EU–Russia energy projects. Image by: The Russian Presidential Press and Information Office (Wikimedia Commons). May 2, 2017

respondents agreed with conspiratorial ideological statements about the war. While 72.8 percent of those surveyed stated that Russia was fully responsible for the war, there is also a group that saw NATO and the United States as clearly to blame, with 14.6 percent holding the Alliance responsible and 15.8 percent blaming the United States. Moreover, a total of 11.4 percent believe that responsibility for the war lies with Ukraine while only 35.1 percent of Germans surveyed hold Ukraine blameless.⁵¹

Germany's Security Engagement in the BSR

Before 2014: Period of Reluctance

German political doctrine emphasizing partnership with Russia casts a shadow over collaboration with the BSR countries. The German approach to NATO enlargement was emblematic. On the one hand,

Berlin supported the attempts of Poland and the three Baltic states (the so-called Vilnius Group) to join the Alliance. On the other hand, German policymakers were extremely careful to secure Russia's acceptance of the enlargement. The NATO–Russia Founding Act was essential in this respect, as Allies agreed not to station additional permanent combat forces on the territories of the former Warsaw Pact states.

Polish accession to NATO provided the first indication of German growing involvement in the multilateral approach in the BSR. In 1997, Germany, Denmark, and Poland established an MNC–N headquartered in Szczecin, Poland. The MNC was the only NATO headquarters on the territory of the former Soviet bloc and played a key role in providing a command-and-control framework for the new members of the Alliance. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the MNC–N in 2004 and achieved full operational capability in 2005.

Despite this move, NATO only slowly started to take steps to enhance the credibility of the collective defense guarantees for this region in the face of Russian (and Belarusian) exercises specifically simulating attacks on the Baltic states and Poland, including *Ladoga 2009*, *Zapad (West) 2009*, *Zapad 2013*, and *Zapad 2017*.⁵² Indeed, activities of the MNC initially focused on conflicts in other parts of the world such as the International Security Assistance Force, a NATO-led military mission in Afghanistan.

One of the reasons for NATO's reluctance was the lack of consensus among its members about the level of threat at the eastern border. Despite Russia's clearly offensive military exercises, NATO needed 4 years to organize an exercise in the region. STEADFAST JAZZ 2013 was the first exercise in the region since the end of the Cold War, therefore of great importance for the BSR. By deploying about 6,000 troops from 17 countries, it tested the readiness and interoperability of the NATO Response Force. Germany was only minimally involved in the exercise, contributing 55 soldiers—compared to 1,200 troops sent by France and 1,040 by Poland.⁵³ As Judy Dempsey observed, Berlin's insignificant involvement revealed “a growing German indifference toward defense and security issues, whether they are related to NATO or the EU.” As previously discussed, Germany's stance on Russia provided another key factor for the decision not to be involved more substantially at the time. This also explained Germany's limited engagement in SABER STRIKE, a U.S. Army Europe–led annual international exercise focused on the Baltic states since 2010, which is designed to enhance interoperability between U.S. forces and regional partners and to demonstrate U.S. commitment to securing the BSR. Berlin did not join the exercise until 2013 and only then through the MNC. Overall, Germany's military involvement in the BSR prior to 2014 could thus be described as hesitant and measured.

After 2014: Toward a Strategy, Incrementally

A new German approach to the BSR started to develop in the wake of Russia's invasion of the Donbas region and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. German policymakers began to recognize Russia as a threat, which the frontline countries on NATO's Eastern Flank had always felt. Even so, German attitudes have not changed much. A recent opinion poll, carried out by the Pew Research Center, showed only 30 percent of German citizens think that Russia constitutes a major threat to German security, compared to 65 percent of Poles.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, we can observe a growing engagement of Germany in the BSR since 2014.

Territorial Defense Initiatives

The 2014 Wales Summit was the venue for major NATO decisions aimed at providing greater security for the BSR. Germany, Denmark, and Poland agreed to raise the level of readiness of the MNC headquarters to a High Readiness Force and gave the MNC command and control over the full range of Alliance missions in its northeastern region (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) with the emphasis on Article 5 mutual defense operations. NATO also created the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The VJTF is composed of up to 5,000 troops (land, maritime, air, and special forces) ready for deployment within 48 to 72 hours. In 2019, Germany took the lead for the VJTF. NATO also increased the size of its Response Force from 25,000 to 40,000 personnel while maintaining the time for deployment at 30 days. Also, Berlin agreed to complement the European Deterrence Initiative launched by the United States in 2014 by providing a combat aviation brigade.

At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO decided to strengthen its defense capabilities on the eastern flank. Germany strongly supported this, mainly by leading the Lithuania-based multinational eFP battlegroup of 1,200 troops from 10 countries, a compromise between the expectations

of Alliance members from the region for a permanent NATO presence and those, like Germany, that argue against it based on the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Nevertheless, the four multinational battalions placed within the framework of the eFP mark NATO's first deployment of combat forces east of the former inner-German border and thus changing the nature of NATO's presence on its eastern flank.

Germans perceive Berlin's declaration to serve as a framework nation in the eFP as a way to reassure its Allies rather than as a German conviction to deter Russia.⁵⁵ Yet the German approach toward the eFP has evolved since 2016 and its military presence in the region has gradually expanded. In 2019, then-German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen announced the investment of a total of €110 million to improve military bases in Lithuania.⁵⁶ Vilnius is becoming Germany's major partner on the eastern flank as military-technical cooperation intensifies.

Military Exercises

Another important element of the German approach to the BSR is the participation in NATO exercises. TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 in Norway and on the Baltic Sea was NATO's biggest exercise in recent years, with 50,000 troops participating. Germany sent about 8,500 Bundeswehr soldiers and several vehicles to the exercise, including about 100 battle tanks and armored personnel carriers. Two years later, NATO put together the DEFENDER EUROPE 2020 exercise, which was the biggest military exercise in Europe since the end of the Cold War, focusing on Germany, Poland, and the Baltic States. As the host nation, Germany's role in the exercise focused mainly on serving as a logistics hub for military units and on testing the German infrastructure needed to move NATO troops from the west to the BSR. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the size, scope, and date of

DEFENDER EUROPE 2020 was modified, and the exercise moved to 2021.⁵⁷

Military Mobility

One of the areas in which German engagement is most visible is the enhancement of military mobility across and beyond Europe. The EU and NATO recognize that the ability to move troops and equipment in a timely manner constitutes one of the major challenges to European security and is a necessary condition for the effective collective defense of the European continent, in particular NATO's eastern flank.⁵⁸ Germany is the major transit nation for large numbers of troops and military equipment from Western Europe to the BSR. The major challenges are infrastructure, including limitations of road surface, weight capacity, bridges capacity, and railway traffic limits, and procedural and legal barriers.⁵⁹ Germany's central location and dense transportation infrastructure place it in the key role of enhancing east/west mobility.

Current German projects are aimed at closing existing shortcomings in infrastructure (rails, roads, bridges) and speeding up the administrative and regulatory procedures necessary to move military assets. One of the key initiatives in this area is the "Military Mobility" project coordinated by the Netherlands and supported by Germany. The other is the "Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations" led by Germany. The former serves as the political-strategic platform to simplify and standardize cross-border military transport procedures while the latter aims for a multinational network based on existing logistic capabilities and infrastructure to decrease reaction time and increase capacities and sustainability for military operations across Europe.

In a major step to address the need for multinational collaboration, Germany in 2018 formed the Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC), located in Ulm. It facilitates the rapid movement

of forces across intra-European borders and works under the NATO Military Command Structure. JSEC played an active and well-recognized role in STEADFAST DEFENSE 21.

German involvement in enhancing military mobility corresponds well with its focus on prioritizing the civilian components of security.

Countering Cyber Threats and Disinformation

Germany and the BSR are targets of frequent Russian disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks.⁶⁰ The German government has reacted to the hostile cyber activities of Moscow and other actors by strengthening its foreign secret service's ability to collect data abroad (a legislative change curtailed by the Constitutional Court in May 2020).⁶¹ It also established a separate Cyber and Information Domain Service within the Bundeswehr in June 2017. The goal is to use its 14,500 soldiers and civilian employees to integrate all Bundeswehr structures dealing with new technologies, cyber security, information technology, and psychological warfare. It is designed to be both offensive and defensive, although Germany's reluctance toward offensive action will probably constrain offensive operations. It should, however, enable the German military to react to the impact of digitalization on military forces by developing skill sets needed to plan and execute operations in the cyber domain to prevent (or at least mitigate) cyber threats and disinformation campaigns. Its commander, Vice Admiral Dr. Thomas Daum, sums it up well, "Our aim is to take a cohesive and comprehensive approach toward understanding a continuously advancing cyber and information domain so that we can meet the challenges of the digital age." Considering that the Bundeswehr was the target of more than 280,000 cyberattacks in January and February 2017 alone,⁶² the launch of a separate service seems appropriate.

Maritime Security

Another change since 2014 is that NATO has paid greater attention to the maritime aspects of collective defense. Germany is active on this front and participates in the Framework Nations Concept to establish the multinational Baltic Maritime Component Command (BMCC) in Rostock, Germany. The new facility should generate expertise on the BSR, currently still missing within the Allied Maritime Command structure and will provide command and control for NATO maritime operations in the Baltic Sea in case of a crisis. The BMCC will provide common maritime and air pictures, naval exercises, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities in the Baltic region.

Out of the eight European Baltic Sea states (nine if Norway is included), Germany has by far the strongest navy.⁶³ Despite the limited readiness capacity of the German navy, the existing difference in power potential makes German active participation in effective regional coordination indispensable. According to one German naval officer, the "north Atlantic and the wider northern flank have returned to our attention as potential areas of operations. . . . The Baltic Sea has grown to a never-seen strategic significance in the past years."⁶⁴ The BMCC is planned to achieve initial operating capability in 2023 and full operating capability in 2025. Furthermore, in the mid-term perspective, the German navy plans to buy new equipment (such as multipurpose combat ships) as well as to modernize the German mine-warfare fleet.

Standing NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG-1) is an element of NATO's standing naval maritime immediate reaction forces and operates primarily in the North Atlantic, North Sea, and Baltic Sea. In 2021, it consisted of one Canadian and one German tanker. SNMG-1 took part in the BALTOPS 2020 exercise alongside 19 NATO Allies and partners in the Baltic Sea⁶⁵ and visits the Baltic Sea at least once a year.

Despite growing German involvement in BSR security, ambiguity toward Russia continued until

2022. In fact, some within the political mainstream opposed the enhancement of the German involvement on the eastern flank, including in the BSR. Also, the above-mentioned SABER STRIKE 2016, which was carried out by the U.S. European Command, headquartered in Stuttgart, was bluntly criticized by then-German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier. He stated that “anyone thinking a symbolic Panzer parade on the eastern border of the Alliance would enhance security, is wrong. . . . We are well advised not to provide cheap pretexts for a renewed old confrontation policy.”⁶⁶ Evidence of this policy is visible in German reluctance to supply Ukraine with heavy military equipment, such as battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. A not insignificant part of the German establishment, including many SPD politicians, fears that delivery of tanks to Ukraine could trigger an “irrational” escalation by Putin.⁶⁷

“Zeitenwende”? German Policy Shifts After Russia Invades Ukraine

On February 27, 2022, 3 days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Scholz addressed the Bundestag, declaring February 24 the turn of the times (*Zeitenwende*) and announcing a departure from three longstanding German foreign policy pillars.

First, from military reluctance: Scholz announced that Germany would spend more than 2 percent of GDP on defense and, to that end, create a special budget (*Sondervermögen*) for the Bundeswehr, worth a staggering €100 billion.⁶⁸ This would catapult Germany to the top tier of global defense spenders.⁶⁹

Second, the chancellor committed to increasing German troop numbers on NATO’s eastern flank, and the first reinforcements have already arrived in Slovakia and Romania.⁷⁰ German troop numbers in the eastern flank remain low for now, but this can be expected to change.

Third, Scholz has agreed to send weapons to Ukraine, declaring a break with a long-established tradition of not supplying arms to warring parties.⁷¹ However, translating the *Zeitenwende* into action is proving difficult. The government’s declared intention to deliver weapons to Ukraine kicked off a debate about the types of military equipment to be exported. German indecisiveness has already drawn the ire of its European partners. The lack of speed is indicative of not only the magnitude of the policy shift but also the struggle that some among the German political elite (especially within the SPD) have in abandoning the failed policy of appeasement toward Russia.⁷²

Another example of Germany’s difficulty in pivoting its Russia policy more forcefully is its long insistence on maintaining Russian oil—and especially gas—imports. Although Russian oil—which plays a far less significant role for German industry than gas—was added to the EU sanction list, and the Nord Stream 2 project was finally declared dead, Germany never actually decided to stop importing Russian gas.⁷³ It was in fact the Russian government’s decision to stop gas exports to Germany—a decision made more permanent by explosions of the Nord Stream I and II pipelines in a suspected sabotage in September 2022. The German economy relies heavily on gas imports, prompting the coalition government to tour the world—from Canada to Saudi Arabia—in search of replacements. At the same time, it announced a policy package worth €200 billion in October 2022 to protect companies and consumers from soaring energy costs. Some among the German political elite, such as Prime Minister of Saxony Michael Kretschmer, still openly advocate for a resumption of Russian gas imports after the end of the war.⁷⁴

The German public seems more willing to move away from cheap Russian gas. As recent polls indicate, there is unequivocal and widespread support for all sanctions across the board and the increase in defense spending. Moreover, respondents showed overwhelming willingness to incur economic



Germany delivers IRIS-T SLM air defence system to Kiev. Image by: Matti Blume (Wikimedia Commons). April 27, 2018

hardship in the context of increased sanctions.⁷⁵

Berlin claims to be Ukraine's biggest financial benefactor, supporting the country with around €2 billion in recent years via a myriad of different support schemes and funds.⁷⁶ Between January and October 2022, Germany has committed another €3.3 billion in bilateral financial, humanitarian, and military support—in addition to routing €3.38 billion via the EU. Germany is also hosting more than 1 million Ukrainian war refugees.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, its reluctance to provide Ukraine with substantial military support⁷⁸ and to support a gas embargo undermines Berlin's credibility as an ally not only in the eyes of Ukraine but also of many NATO countries.⁷⁹

Conclusion

German BSR security policy reflects two overarching goals that are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, Germany aims to strengthen multilateral cooperation and to show more leadership

in common defense structures within NATO and the EU. On the other hand, Germany's perception of Russia, and particularly its vision of a long-term strategic partnership, clearly diverges from that of its partners in the BSR. This has a tempering effect on German engagement in the region, to the displeasure of its regional allies.

The main challenge for German security policy with respect to the BSR (and beyond) seems to be the lack of a coherent strategy. German verbal assurances of its readiness to defend its eastern European allies are contradicted by the memory of the Cold War *Ostpolitik* that attached special importance to close cooperation and dialogue with Russia. Indeed, the "new Ostpolitik," called for by then-Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in 2018, reflects this ambiguity by calling for a European approach toward cooperation with Russia in the face of "dangerous silence" between Washington and Moscow, while taking into account the concerns of all member states—the

Baltics, Poland, and those in Western Europe.⁸⁰ German participation in the eFP and other activities aimed to enhance the security of the BSR and the concurrent energy dependence on Russia—and previous support for the Nord Stream II project—illustrate this dichotomy in practical terms.

This undermines German credibility as an ally. Yet German involvement on the eastern flank along with the increase in defense spending, continues to be not only a salient but also highly divisive issue among German political parties.⁸¹ We should not expect a coherent BSR security strategy any time soon, particularly as these fissures extend to the prospective government coalition parties.

Germany's ambiguity and limited engagement in the BSR has several sources. Internally, a key hindering factor seems to be the lack of a cross-party consensus over major foreign and security related questions, such as the magnitude of defense spending (including maintenance issues), the commitment to the transatlantic alliance, support for the French-led idea of European strategic autonomy, and relations with Russia. Despite the reassuring declarations from then-Foreign Affairs Minister Maas that "Our neighbors in Poland and the Baltic can trust us to take their security needs as seriously as we take our own,"⁸² the political reality in Germany is more complicated.

As this analysis shows, reassuring rhetoric from German policymakers and German engagement on the eastern flank are only beginning to develop and could be more substantial. At the same time, German policies regarding Nord Stream II and the Navalny case point out the existing ambiguity in relations with Moscow. At its heart is the remarkable consistency in Germany's medium-term and long-term strategic objective of achieving security with—not against—Russia.⁸³ The Russian invasion of Ukraine has turned this upside down and is a significant challenge to German foreign policy, which Germany is struggling to grapple with.

Moreover, the recently revived debate about nuclear deterrence illustrates the divide among (outgoing *and* expectedly incoming) governing coalition parties and German political elites on major security questions such as cooperation with the United States.⁸⁴ In June 2022, only 12 percent of Germans were still in favor of modernizing U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany. Almost as many were in favor of their withdrawal as in favor of maintaining the status quo. Seventy-one percent were against their country having access to its own nuclear weapons.⁸⁵ This stalemate restrains Germany's role in NATO and, in particular, on the eastern flank.

Another major challenge is disagreements between the United States and Germany.⁸⁶ Continued disagreements over key security issues have presented an increasing challenge to the BSR. Germany's historically rooted commitment to multilateralism contrasted quite significantly with the Trump and Biden paradigms of inter-state strategic competition with China and Russia. Such difficulties reflect a long-felt and often-lamented sentiment that Germany is not shouldering its fair share, particularly regarding its unmet promise to increase its defense spending to 2 percent of its GDP. Though recently Germany has pledged to meet this goal the implementation of *Zeitenwende* has proved to be a difficult process. Despite recent improvements in transatlantic relations, deeper divergence in strategic medium- and long-term objectives will continue to undermine the credibility of NATO, which remains the key security provider in Europe, including the BSR. Even with a new German government and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one cannot expect the differences between Washington and Berlin to disappear. They have been papered over by Russian aggression but the fundamental differences in *Weltanschauung* of the two states remain.

All the efforts described herein are necessary but not sufficient to deter further Russian aggression in Ukraine. As Russian President Putin becomes

more aggressive overseas and unpopular at home, he is stepping up international destabilization efforts to reinforce his situation at home. Because we will certainly see more Russian political warfare for the foreseeable future, the states in the greater BSR must not only increase their efforts but also increase regional cooperation to maintain peace and stability in the area. **PRISM**

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