[This article has been accepted for publication in Defense & Security Analysis, published by Taylor & Francis.]

German "Pacifism" and the *Zeitenwende*

Frank A. Stengel, Kiel University, Kiel, Germany

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a major reorientation of German security policy, committing the federal government to a significant increase in defence spending as well as arms deliveries to Ukraine. Scholz's announcement of a *Zeitenwende* (sea change) has triggered a renewed debate about continuity and change in German security policy, with some observers claiming that the *Zeitenwende* marks the end of German 'pacifism', the country's traditional culture of military reticence. In this article, I challenge this framing of the issue. I argue that both talking about German military reticence in terms of 'pacifism' and conceptualizing it as a rather stable element of culture fail to grasp the messy empirical reality of post-*Zeitenwende* security policy and leads to false expectations regarding future foreign policy behaviour. I argue in favour of complementing this perspective with a more differentiated discursive approach.

Keywords: Germany; defense; Bundeswehr; pacifism; antimilitarism; strategic culture; discourse; Zeitenwende; Russia; Ukraine; Olaf Scholz; Friedrich Merz

1 Introduction

It was supposed to be an act of release. On February 27, 2022, three days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a major strategic reorientation to react to what he called a *Zeitenwende*, a sea change (lit. a "turn of the times"), in European security. After decades of austerity, Germany would undertake a "big national effort" to transform its ailing armed forces, the *Bundeswehr*, into "a powerful, ultra-modern, advanced" force.[1] To that end, the federal

[1] Olaf Scholz, "Regierungserklärung durch den Bundeskanzler zu aktuellen Lage," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 20th legislative period, 19th session, 27 February 2022, 1352. For discussions of the current state of the *Bundeswehr*, see Hauke Friedrichs, *Spielball der Politik. Eine kurze Geschichte der Bundeswehr* (Bonn:

government announced a €100bn special fund and committed themselves annually to "invest more than 2 percent of the gross domestic product into our defense."[2] In addition, in what the government itself framed as a major departure from German post-1945 tradition, Berlin would supply weapons to Ukraine to help the country fight off Russia's attack. Germany would, Scholz announced, do "whatever is needed to secure the peace in Europe."[3] Since then, the government has doubled down on this bold announcement. For instance, in a 2023 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Scholz claimed that Germany would become "the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be."[4] Likewise, the 2023 National Security Strategy – Germany's first – calls for the *Bundeswehr* to become "one of the most effective conventional armed forces in Europe," the 2023 Defense Policy Guidelines even call for it to become nothing less than "the backbone of deterrence and collective defense in Europe," and in an op-ed published in *The Economist* in May 2024, Scholz described the changes in German security policy as "unprecedented, tectonic shifts."[5] Although Scholz originally used the term *Zeitenwende* only refer to Russia's actions, it has since been applied to the change in German security policy as well, highlighting its significance.[6]

Not surprisingly, the *Zeitenwende* has renewed long-standing debates about change and continuity in German foreign and security policy.[7] Two points in particular are prominent in the discussion. First, observers disagree on whether the shift presents "nothing less than a revolution" or mere "baby steps".[8]

Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2024); Carlo Masala, *Bedingt abwehrbereit. Deutschlands Schwäche in der Zeitenwende* (München: C. H. Beck, 2023).

[2] Scholz, "Regierungserklärung," 1353.

[3] Scholz, , "Regierungserklärung," 1351-1352.

[4] Olaf Scholz, "The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 1 (2023): 22.

[5] Federal Government, *Integrated Security for Germany: National Security Strategy* (Berlin: Federal Government, 2023), 13; Federal Ministry of Defence, *Defence Policy Guidelines 2023* (Berlin: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2023), 6; Olaf Scholz, "Olaf Scholz on why Vladimir Putin's brutal imperialism will fail," *The Economist*, May 23rd, 2024, https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/05/23/olaf-scholz-on-why-vladimir-putins-brutal-imperialism-will-fail.

[6] Tobias Bunde, "Zeitenwende as a Foreign Policy Identity Crisis: Germany and the Travails of Adaptation after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, online first (2025), doi: 10.1177/13691481241311568.

[7] See Klaus Brummer and Friedrich Kießling, eds., *Zivilmacht Bundesrepublik? Bundesdeutsche außenpolitische Rollen vor und nach 1989 aus politik- und geschichtswissenschaftlichen Perspektiven* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019).

[8] Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, "The War in Ukraine Just Caused a Revolution in German Military Affairs," *World Politics Review*, March 22, 2022, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30413/germany-defense-spending-hike-is-a-revolution-in-military-affairs; Benjamin Tallis, "What Zeitenwende?," *Internationale*

Second, related to the first aspect, scholars debate how to make sense of the shift considering Germany's deeply engrained strategic "culture of restraint"; also often referred to as the country's "anti-militarism," "pacifism", or "civilian power" role, an "extraordinary reluctance to become actively involved in international military security affairs." [9] Interpretations differ, with some arguing that the *Zeitenwende* basically marks the end of "German hesitancy,"[10] some insisting that Germany's strategic culture of restraint "showed resilience,"[11] and others falling in between.[12]

Politik Quarterly, October 19, 2022, https://ip-quarterly.com/en/what-zeitenwende. It should be noted that Major and Mölling have since pointed out that the financial means allocated do not match the grandiose rhetoric. See Claudia Major, „Verteidigung und Abschreckung," in *Nach der Nationalen Sicherheitsstrategie – die nächsten Schritte*, eds. Markus Kaim, Stefan Mair (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2023) https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/nach-der-nationalen-sicherheitsstrategie-die-naechsten-schritte; Christian Mölling and Torben Schütz, *Verteidigungshaushalt 2024*, DGAP Memo no. 2 (Berlin: DGAP, 2023), https://dgap.org/de/forschung/publikationen/verteidigungshaushalt-2024. Related to this is the normative question of whether Germany should significantly increase its investment in defense and/or continue to support Ukraine with weapons. See Masala, *Bedingt abwehrbereit*; Johannes Varwick, "'Kriegstüchtigkeit' als neues Paradigma deutscher Verteidigungspolitik?," *GWP–Gesellschaft. Wirtschaft. Politik* 73, no. 2 (2024): 135-42.

[9] Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 1. Different scholars use different theoretical concepts to account for this peculiar stance, including norms, roles, cultures and identities. See Rainer Baumann and Gunther Hellmann. "Germany and the Use of Military Force: 'Total War', the 'Culture of Restraint' and the Quest for Normality," *German Politics* 10, no. 1 (2001): 61-82; Beverly Crawford and Kim B. Olsen, "The Puzzle of Persistence and Power: Explaining Germany's Normative Foreign Policy," *German Politics* 26, no. 4 (2017): 591-608; Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, *Germany, Pacifism and Peace Enforcement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); John S. Duffield, *World Power Forsaken: Political Culture, International Institutions, and German Security Policy After Unification* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Anna Geis, "Burdens of the Past, Shadows of the Future: The Use of Military Force as a Challenge for the German 'Civilian Power'," in *The Militant Face of Democracy: Liberal Forces for Good*, eds. Anna Geis, Harald Müller, and Niklas Schörnig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 231-68; Sebastian Harnisch and Hanns W. Maull, eds., *Germany as a Civilian Power? The Foreign Policy of the Berlin Republic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Kerry Longhurst, *Germany and the Use of Force* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

[10] Karl-Heinz Kamp, "The Zeitenwende at Work: Germany's National Security Strategy," *Survival* 65, no. 3 (2023): 73; Liana Fix, "The End of Civilian Power: Russia's War Is Changing German Policy," in *Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century: Atomic Zeitenwende?*, ed. Ulrich Kühn (London: Routledge, 2024): 38-57. Patrick Mello, while less absolute in his assessment, appears to come down in favor of change as well. See Patrick A. Mello, "Zeitenwende: German Foreign Policy Change in the Wake of Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Politics and Governance* 12 (2023), https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7346; Patrick A. Mello, "The Party Politics of National Role Contestation: Germany's 'traffic light' coalition and the Russian war against Ukraine," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, online first (2025), doi: 10.1080/09557571.2025.2464924.

[11] Molly O'Neal, "Zeitenwende, Europe and Germany's Culture of Restraint," *The International Spectator* 59, no. 2 (2024): 2; see also John Helferich, "The (false) promise of Germany's Zeitenwende," *European View* 22, no. 1 (2023): 92; Vladimír Handl, Tomáš Nigrin, and Martin Mejstřík, "Turnabout or Continuity? The German Zeitenwende and the Reaction of the V4 Countries to It," *Journal of European Integration* 45, no. 3 (2023): 514; for overviews, see Linda Bachg and Ingo Peters, "Kontinuität durch Wandel: Literaturbericht zur Deutschen Außenpolitik zwischen Krim-Krise und 'Zeitenwende' (2014—2022)," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 30, no. 2 (2023): 66-96; Annegret Bendiek, "Deutsche Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik gefangen in der Politikverpflichtungsfalle: Die Zeitenwende aus der Sicht der Politikwissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 34, no. 3 (2024): 407-23. Rafał Ulatowski has recently advanced a realist explanation, making the case in favor of continuity based on "the structure of the international system," see Ulatowski, "The Illusion of Germany's Zeitenwende," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2024): 60.

[12] Bernhard Blumenau, "Breaking with convention? Zeitenwende and the traditional pillars of German foreign policy," *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2022): 1895-1913; Dirk Nabers and Frank A. Stengel, "Crisis and Change

This article seeks to add to our understanding of the German *Zeitenwende* by placing it in the context of Cold-War German security policy and the debates surrounding German participation in multinational operations outside the NATO area (so-called out-of-area operations) during the 1990s and 2000s. In doing so, it advances three main arguments: First, contrasting the German *Zeitenwende* not just with the past decades but also with Cold War German security policy shows that the policy change is less radical than often presumed, raising doubts regarding in particular more far-reaching claims of a German departure from its traditional "civilian power" role.[13] During the Cold War the civilian power Germany was heavily armed and spent significantly more money on defense than even the most far-reaching proposals today envisage. More problematic are arguments that the *Zeitenwende* signifies the end of German "pacifism" insofar as Germany has never really been pacifist in any strict sense of the word.[14] Second, the discussion of German participation in military operations outside the NATO area (so-called out-of-area operations) shows that as far as the culture of restraint is concerned, the developments of the 1990s and 2000s have been much more significant. Regarding anti-militarism, the post-*Zeitenwende* shift is less significant compared to Germany's involvement in Afghanistan. This is not to say that the *Zeitenwende* does not present a significant shift compared to previous decades, but it is not as radical as some observers make it out to be. Third, based on the discussion of out-of-area operations and the *Zeitenwende* the article argues for a more flexible understanding of the culture. Much of the debate on German foreign and security policy is informed by an understanding of culture (and other ideational factors) as a rather static constraint on policy that mostly changes in a gradual fashion unless disrupted by external shocks. This linear conception of change fits neither German policy on out-of-area operations nor the *Zeitenwende*.[15]

This debate is not just of purely academic concern, but also of practical relevance insofar as the response to these questions influences what Berlin's allies can reasonably expect of future German foreign and

in Post-Zeitenwende German Security Policy," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, online first (2025), doi: 10.1007/s11615-024-00584-5.

[13] See Hanns W. Maull, "Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 5 (1990): 91-106.

[14] See Jakub Eberle, "Germany Has Never Been a Pacifist Power," *Foreign Policy*, April 4, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/04/germany-pacifism-military-defense-ukraine-war-scholz/; Brian C. Rathbun, "The Myth of German Pacifism," *German Politics & Society* 24, no. 2 (2006): 68-81.

[15] See Nabers and Stengel, "Crisis and change".

security policy. Given the increasingly likely "Amerexit" from NATO under President Donald J. Trump, realistic expectations regarding the country with the largest economy in Europe appears more important than ever.[16] The article is structured along the main lines of the argument outlined above. After discussing Cold War German security policy, out-of-area operations and the Zeitenwende, the article closes with a brief outlook of what can be expected of Berlin in the future.

2 A "Pacifist" Armed to the Teeth: German Security during the Cold War

Already during the Cold War, German security policy was marked by the tension between a firm rejection of militarism and the maintenance of a credible conventional deterrent against the Warsaw Pact. After the Second World War, the newly founded FRG's self-image was explicitly built around a radical break with its authoritarian predecessors, the *Kaiserreich* and Nazi Germany.[17] In contrast to the old Germany, which had been authoritarian, aggressive, and internationally isolated (the infamous German special path or *Sonderweg*), the "new Germany," as the first Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer referred to the FRG in first government policy statement in 1949, was envisaged as liberal democratic, inherently peaceful, and an integral part of the West.[18] To break with the past, Allies and German leaders agreed, required above all a rejection of the "Prussian-German militarism" thought to be a core driver behind the world wars.[19] Thus, the Allies initially set out not only to denazify and democratise Germany, but also to demilitarise the country.[20] This anti-militarist position is also visible in the German Constitution, unceremoniously labelled the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz* – GG), which

[16] John Kornblum, "The Amerexit," *The American Interest* 12, no. 1 (2016), http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/07/25/no-exit-from-europe/; on Trump and NATO, see Susan Colbourn, "Donald Trump and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Deal," in *Chaos Reconsidered*, eds. Jervis Robert et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023): 161-7; Robert Jervis, "The Trump Experiment: An Assessment," in *Chaos Reconsidered*, eds. Jervis Robert et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023): 15-27.

[17] See Frank A. Stengel, *The Politics of Military Force: Antimilitarism, Ideational Change and Post-Cold War German Security Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[18] Konrad Adenauer, "Erklärung der Bundesregierung," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 1st legislative period, 5th session, 20 September 1949, 22.

[19] Detlef Bald, "Die Reform des Militärs in der Ära Adenauer," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002), 204.

[20] Ibid.

prohibits any actions intended to "disturb the peaceful relations between nations," including in particular the preparation of wars of aggression.[21]

At the same time, this opposition to militarism did not mean that the founders of the FRG were pacifists in any strict sense of the term understood as a normative rejection of "war as an acceptable means of achieving peace" that, depending on the specific version, includes a rejection of armed forces and/or any form of violence altogether.[22] Adenauer, who would, in debates leading up to the decision to rearm Germany in 1954, declared German militarism "dead," believed that armed forces were a necessary precondition for sovereignty.[23] In fact, the question of a German military had already been discussed in the *Parlamentarischer Rat*, the constituent assembly that wrote the FRG's constitution, and Adenauer's conservative Christian Democratic Union was not opposed to a West European army. Even the Basic Law did not reject military force altogether. Already in its original form, passed on 23 May 1949, the it explicitly permitted the FRG to join a system of collective security. That at least implicitly acknowledges that Germany might at some point have to come to the aid of an ally if under attack.[24]

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 convinced U.S. President Harry S. Truman that German rearmament was necessary to close the "European defense gap."[25] Adenauer was clearly in favour, too, and even the much more sceptical Social Democratic Party (SPD) only opposed rearmament because they feared that rearmament might become an obstacle to German unification.[26] With the Paris Treaties of 1955, the FRG was accepted into the Western defence alliance. The constitutional amendment of 19 March 1956 provides that the FRG should establish armed forces for defensive purposes (explicitly acknowledging national defence as a legitimate form of war).[27] Having said that, at the time the *Bundeswehr*'s mission was strictly limited to national and alliance defence, and its *Bundeswehr*'s main

---

[21] Art. 26 (1) Basic Law.

[22] Andrew Fiala, "Pacifism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2021 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Standford, CA: Stanford University, 2021), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/pacifism/.

[23] Konrad Adenauer, "Rede vor dem Deutschen Bundestag," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 2nd legislative period, 61st session, 15 December 1954, 3134. See Bald, „Die Reform des Militärs in der Ära Adenauer".

[24] Art. 24 (2) Basic Law.

[25] Klaus von Schubert, *Wiederbewaffnung und Westintegration: die innere Auseinandersetzung um die militärische und außenpolitische Orientierung der Bundesrepublik 1950-1952*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: DVA, 1970), 17.

[26] Bald, "Die Reform des Militärs in der Ära Adenauer"; von Schubert, *Wiederbewaffnung und Westintegration*.

[27] Art 87a Basic Law.

task was not to wage war, but to prevent it from ever recuring by maintaining a credible deterrent against the Warsaw Pact. As then-Defence Minister Gerhard Stoltenberg put it in the late 1980s, the Bundeswehr's central task was to "practice the case of emergency [*Ernstfall*] to prevent the case of emergency".[28] Before the 1990s, any German military involvement (aside from humanitarian assistance) outside NATO's area of operations was considered unconstitutional and politically unacceptable.[29]

Still, despite this basic antimilitarist stance, the FRG maintained significant conventional forces that formed "the keystone to NATO's conventional defence."[30] Between 1953 and 1990, Germany spent more than 2.5% of its GDP on defence each year, in 1963 even reaching a high mark of 4.9%.[31] During the Cold War the *Bundeswehr* had almost 500,000 active military personnel, and at its peak in 1990 maintained more than 5,000 main battle tanks (see fig. 1 below).[32]

[28] Gerhard Stoltenberg, "Rede vor dem Deutschen Bundestag," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 11th legislative period, 182nd session, 7 December 1989, p. 13988.

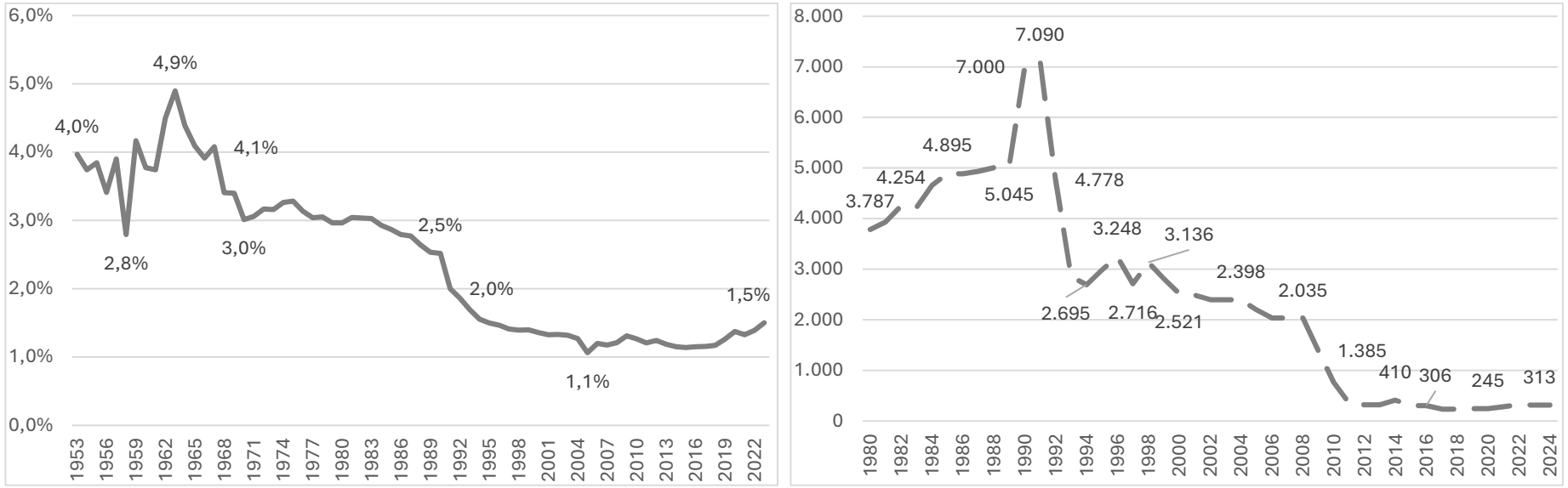
[29] Nina Philippi, "Civilian Power and War: The German Debate About out-of-Area Operations 1990-99," in *Germany as a Civilian Power? The Foreign Policy of the Berlin Republic*, *Issues in German Politics*, eds. Sebastian Harnisch and Hanns W. Maull (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2001).

[30] Anthony H. Cordesman, *NATO's Central Region Forces* (London: Jane's, 1987), 82.

[31] *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, https://milex.sipri.org/sipri.

[32] IISS, *The Military Balance 1981−2025* (London: Routledge, 1981-2025). The values for 1990 and 1991 are outliers because during these two years the *Bundeswehr*'s arsenal temporarily included tanks from the former Eastern German National People's Army which were quickly retired.

Figure 1: German defense expenditure (in percent of GDP, 1953-2023) and number of main battle tanks (absolute numbers, 1985-2024)

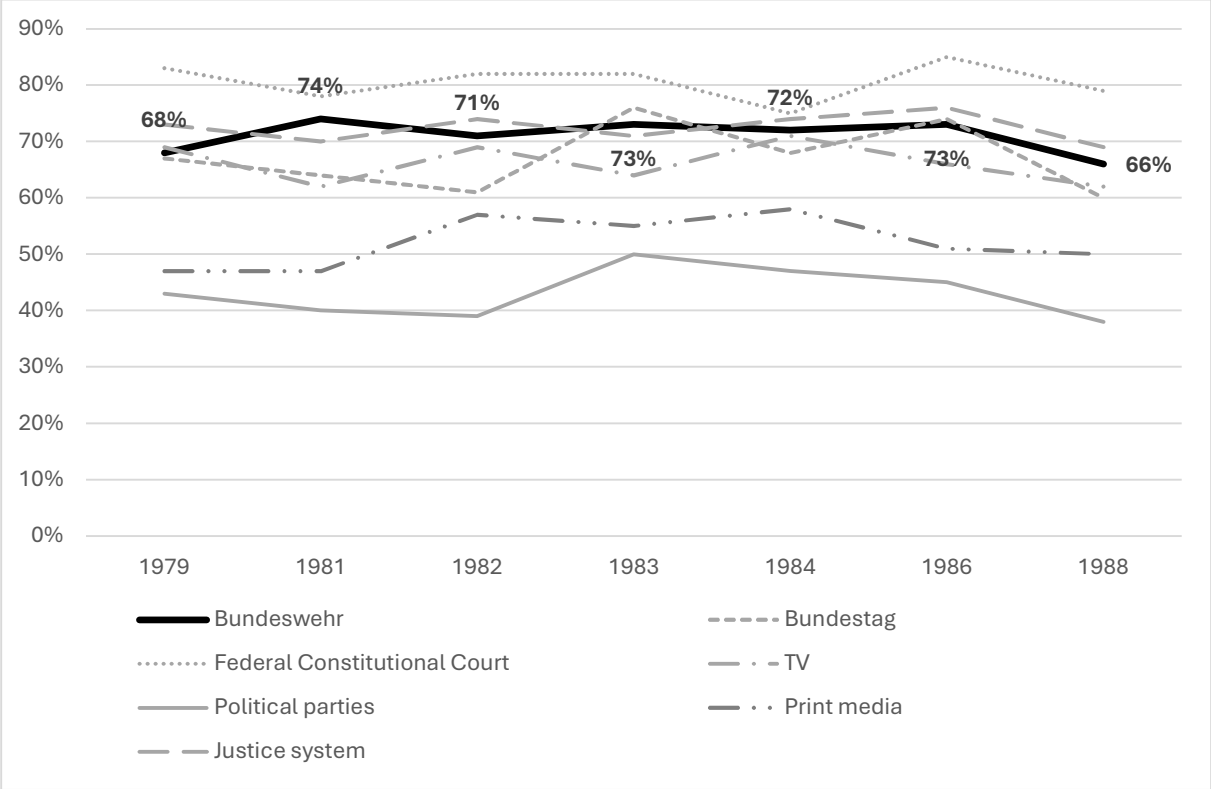


Author's illustration[33]

[33] See note 32, 33 above. Note that before 1985 *The Military Balance* (TMP) counted some armored personnel carriers as "tanks". The numbers shown here have been calculated as the sum of main battle tanks, *i.e.*, the types of weapons systems listen in TMP 1985 under "tanks" (*M-48*, *Leopard 1* and *2*). As a result, the numbers shown here for 1980-1984 deviate from those shown in TMP.

Importantly, this was not just an elite thing either. While key events in the history of the *Bundeswehr* were indeed accompanied by protests; from rearmament and the stationing of nuclear weapons in Germany in the 1950s to NATO's double-track decision in the 1980s to the Kosovo intervention in the 1990s,[34] the *Bundeswehr* as an institution enjoyed high levels of trust among the German public (see fig. 2 below).

Fig. 2: Trust in institutions, 1979-1988 (EMNID)



Author's illustration[35]

[34] Christian Lahusen, "Soziale Bewegungen," in *Handwörterbuch zur Gesellschaft Deutschlands*, ed. Steffen Mau and Nadine M. Schöneck (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), pp. 717-729; Michael Schwab-Trapp, *Kriegsdiskurse. Die politische Kultur des Krieges im Wandel 1991-1999* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2002).

[35] EMNID, "Das Vertrauen in Öffentliche Institutionen - Ein Vergleich zwischen Erwachsenen und Jugendlichen," *EMNID-Informationen* 34, no. 3 (1982): 9-10; EMNID, "Das Vertrauen in Öffentliche Institutionen," *EMNID-Informationen* 35, no. 4 (1983): 9-10; EMNID, "Das Vertrauen in Öffentliche Institutionen," *EMNID-Informationen* 36, no. 5 (1984): 15-6; EMNID, "Das Vertrauen in Öffentliche Institutionen," *EMNID-Informationen* 38, no. 10 (1986): 19-21; EMNID, "Das Vertrauen in Öffentliche Institutionen," *EMNID-Informationen* 40, no. 11-12 (1988): 15-6. EMNID only began in 1979 asking about trust in institutions, and corresponding survey items were not included every year.

In addition, when asked about their affection (or lack thereof) for the soldiers of the *Bundeswehr* in two separate surveys conducted in 1970 and 1988, respondents did not express strong antipathy (see table 1 below). In 1970, 42% found the soldiers of the *Bundeswehr* rather likable, only 3% articulated antipathy, and 38% expressed no particular feelings one way or the other. In 1988, 77% of respondents found German soldiers rather likable, as opposed to 17% who found them rather unlikable.[36] While it is important not to over-interpret such survey results, one would still expect a pacifist society to express more distrust towards armed forces and negative feelings towards soldiers.

Table 1: Likability of German soldiers (EMNID)

	1970	**1988**
Rather likable	42%	77%
Rather unlikable	3%	17%
Neither – nor	38%	-
No interest	13%	-
No response	5%	6%

EMNID[37]

Two points are worth highlighting here: First, broadening the historical context to include Cold War German security policy puts the radicality of the policy shift into perspective. Even if a future German government were to implement the Scholz government's declared policies in full (and given the current constraints of the federal budget, this remains to be seen), the *Bundeswehr*'s capabilities would remain well below Cold-War levels. Second, a brief glance at Cold-War German security policy clearly shows that neither German elites nor the majority of the German population were ever pacifist in any strict sense of the word. Even a broader understanding of pacifism as a "metaphor for scepticism vis-à-vis the military" risks creating false expectations insofar as even colloquially pacifism refers to a general

[36] Note that the 1988 survey did not provide either "neither – nor" or "no interest" as response categories, which might in part explain the significantly higher number of respondents expressing positive feelings towards German soldiers. Still, they did not overwhelmingly express negative feelings either.

[37] EMNID, "Image Der Bundeswehrsoldaten," *EMNID-Informationen* 40, no. 10 (1988): 10.

"opposition to war and violence as a means of settling disputes" or "the belief that war and violence are always wrong."[38] Thinking about German attitudes in terms of pacifism will unavoidably lead one to overestimate changes in German security policy.

3 Germany's Struggle with Out-of-Area Operations

Still, as noted at the outset, German strategic culture is marked by a reluctance to become militarily involved abroad, which is different from, for instance, France of the United States.[39] But if we want to avoid making false predictions regarding future German foreign policy behaviour, it is important to understand what exactly this reluctance relates to and whether it has at all changed. To begin with, German reluctance focuses more narrowly on military involvement abroad beyond the narrow confines of collective defence within NATO. This is what commonly referred to as "anti-militarism" in the literature.[40] But also this narrower anti-militarist culture has not remained constant but changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. Having said that, the exact nature of cultural change still remains poorly understood, which is to a significant extent due to a specific understanding (implicit or explicit) of what kind of a "thing" anti-militarism is, and this leads to oversimplified assumptions of how cultural change works.

As Jakub Eberle has pointed out, German foreign policy research is dominated by what he calls "soft-constructivist" approaches that focus on "ideational" factors like rules, norms, values, (elements of culture), roles or identity.[41] In a nutshell, these approaches assume that actors behave according to a

[38] I am quoting here an anonymous reviewer who helpfully pointed this out. See "Pacifism," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pacifism; "Pacifism," *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/pacifism.

[39] Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism;* Adrian Hyde-Price, "The 'Sleep-Walking Giant' Awakes: Resetting German Foreign and Security Policy," *European Security* 24, no. 4 (2015): 600-16; William E. Paterson, "The Reluctant Hegemon? Germany Moves Centre Stage in the European Union," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 49(2011): 57-75; Alexandra Sakaki et al., *Reluctant Warriors: Germany, Japan, and Their Us Alliance Dilemma*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019). There are, however, some parallels to other countries, most notably Japan. See Berger, Cultures of Antimilitarism; Maull, "Germany and Japan"; Frank A. Stengel, "The Reluctant Peacekeeper: Japan's Ambivalent Stance on UN Peace Operations," *Japan aktuell - Journal of Current Japanese Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2008): 37-55.

[40] See Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism*.

[41] Jakub Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy: Germany and the Iraq War* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 4; Akan Malici, "Germans as Venutians: The Culture of German Foreign Policy Behavior," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2, no. 1 (2006): 37.

"logic of appropriateness" in line with internalised norms and values.[42] These factors are assumed to be rather stable and constrain foreign policy. German reluctance to become militarily involved abroad then would be due to anti-militarism as a constraining factor. This notion of culture has become broadly accepted amongst German foreign policy researchers, including those working outside the constructivist tradition.[43]

However, while this theoretical model works rather well to explain policy continuity, it is less suitable to explain policy change, as Germany's changed stance on out-of-area operations demonstrates.[44] After refusing to participate militarily in Operation Desert Storm, Germany faced criticism for what allies perceived as Berlin's "checkbook diplomacy," putting the until then taken for granted compatibility between the three central pillars of German foreign policy – anti-militarism, Western integration and multi-lateralism − in doubt.[45] After extensive political debates and series of landmark decisions by the Federal Constitutional Court in 1993 and 1994, German governments have gradually expanded the *Bundeswehr*'s participation in military operations abroad. This is in big part due to external expectations, which are of particular importance to Germany due to its engrained tradition of Western integration and multi-lateralism.[46] Since then, out-of-area operations, once "completely unthinkable" in Chancellor Angela Merkel's words, have become a widely accepted (at least among political elites), more or less normal instrument of German security policy.[47] Importantly, German troops even participated in the (de

[42] See James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The Logic of Appropriateness," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science,* ed. Robert E. Goodin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604456.013.0024.

[43] See e.g. Franz-Josef Meiers, *Bundeswehr am Wendepunkt: Perspektiven deutscher Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017).

[44] On an extensive discussion of the justification of military interventions, see Hubert Zimmermann, *Militärische Missionen: Rechtfertigungen bewaffneter Auslandeinsätze in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2023).

[45] Franz-Josef Meiers, "Von der Scheckbuchdiplomatie zur Verteidigung am Hindukusch. Die Rolle der Bundeswehr bei multinationalen Auslandseinsätzen 1990-2009," *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 3, no. 2 (2010), pp. 201-222; see Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations.*

[46] Rainer Baumann, *Der Wandel des deutschen Multilateralismus. Eine diskursanalytische Untersuchung deutscher Außenpolitik* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2006).

[47] Angela Merkel, "Rede vor dem Deutschen Bundestag," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 17th legislative period, 37th session, April 22, 2010, 3478. See Sebastian Enskat and Carlo Masala, "Einsatzarmee Bundeswehr. Fortsetzung der deutschen Außenpolitik mit anderen Mitteln?," *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 8, no. 1 (2015), pp. 365-378. It should be noted however that the situation was not as clear cut as Merkel's statement suggests. See Alexander Troche, "'Ich habe nur die Hoffnung, dass der Kelch an uns vorübergeht ...': Der Zypernkonflikt und die erste deutsche Out-of-area-Entscheidung," *Historisch-politische Mitteilungen* 7(2000): 183-95.

facto combat) operation in Afghanistan, Germany's "by far bloodiest mission to date."[48] This development is remarkable not least because the shift towards out-of-area operations was largely implemented by the SPD and the Greens, two parties that used to be among the most critical of military operations abroad.[49] Today, only the right-wing extremist *Alternative für Deutschland* and the leftist *Die Linke* are strictly opposed to out-of-area operations.[50]

What is often lost in debates about out-of-area operations is that support for the *Bundeswehr* and its activities them is not limited to political elites. To begin with, despite its transformation from a territorial defence force to an intervention force, the *Bundeswehr* to enjoy widespread support among the general public. According to survey data by the Bundeswehr's Centre for Military History and Social Sciences (ZMSBw), in 2024 85% of respondents expressed trust in the *Bundeswehr*, making it the second-most trusted institution after the police.[51] Majorities of survey respondents consistently answer that they consider the *Bundeswehr* important, or very important for Germany, report an overall positive attitude (very positive, positive, rather positive) towards the *Bundeswehr*, and express that they hold the institution in "high" or "rather high" esteem (see fig. 3 below). These attitudes have remained rather constant for years.[52]

Fig. 3: Public attitudes towards the Bundeswehr

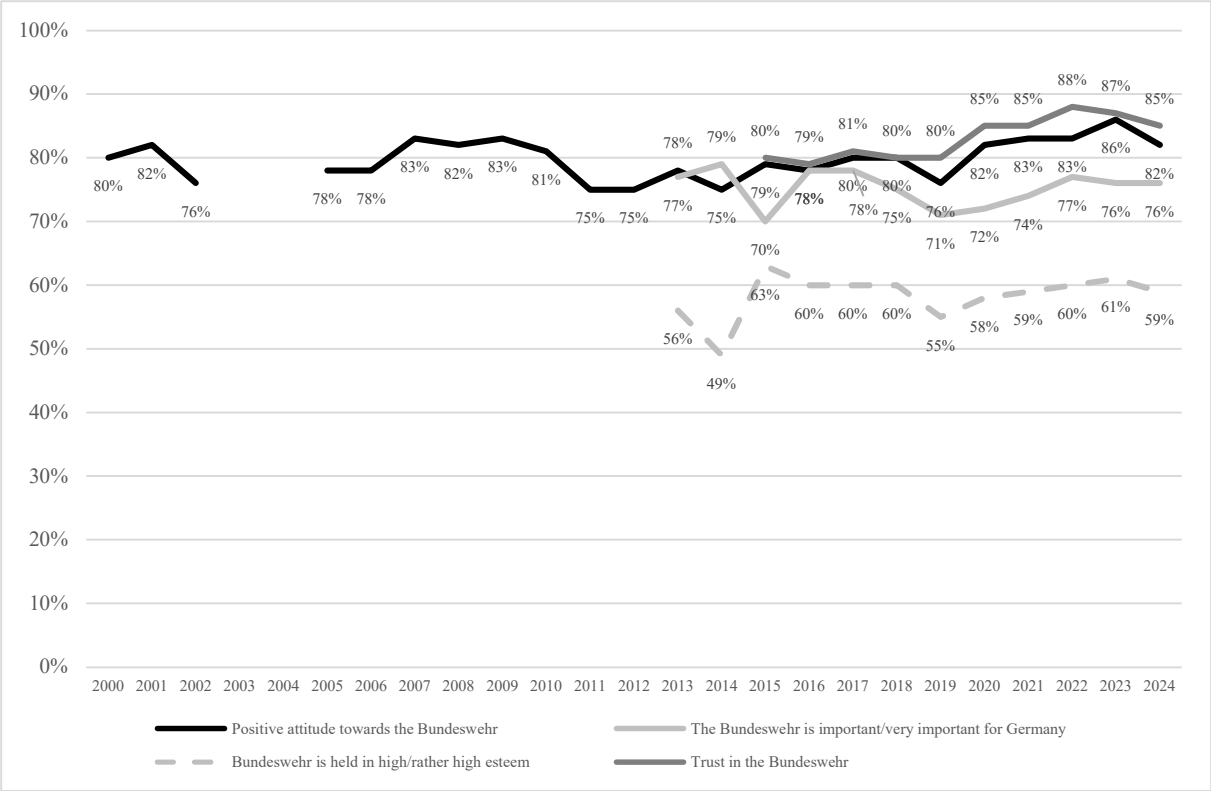
[48] David Shim and Frank A. Stengel, "Social Media, Gender and the Mediatisation of War: Exploring the German Armed Forces' Visual Representation of the Afghanistan Operation on Facebook," *Global Discourse* 7, no. 2-3 (2017), 333; on the Afghanistan operation, see Axel Heck, *Der Luftangriff von Kundus. Legitimität, Identität und die Anwendung militärischer Gewalt* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023); Timo Noetzel, "The German politics of war: Kunduz and the war in Afghanistan," *International Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2011): 397-417.

[49] The Green Party actually had a significant pacifist faction. See Daniel Brunstetter and Scott Brunstetter, "Shades of Green: Engaged Pacifism, the Just War Tradition, and the German Greens," *International Relations* 25, no. 1 (2011): 65-84.

[50] See Florian Böller, "Fuelling Politicisation: The AfD and the Politics of Military Interventions in the German Parliament," *German Politics* 33, no. 3 (2024): 1-23; Axel Heck, "Ready, Steady, No? The Contested Legitimacy of Weapon Deliveries to Ukraine in German Foreign Policy Discourse," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift,* online first (2024), doi: 10.1007/s11615-024-00554-x.

[51] Timo Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst und Kriegstauglichkeit. Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2024*, Forschungsbericht no. 137 (Potsdam: ZMSBw, 2024).

[52] Timo Graf et al., *Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild. Ergebnisse und Analysen der Bevölkerungsbefragung 2021*, Forschungsbericht no. 131 (Potsdam: ZMSBw, 2022), 129-33.



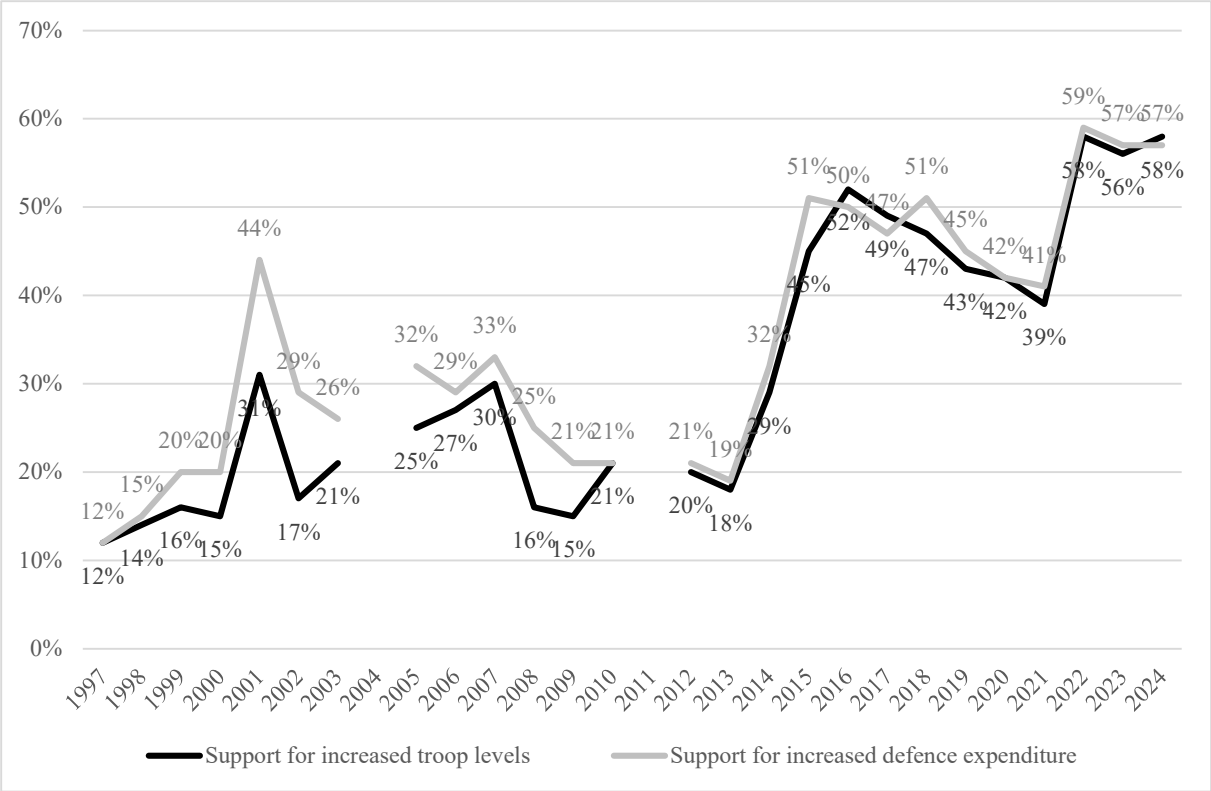
Author's illustration based on ZMSBw data[53]

Moreover, as figure 4 below shows, large portions of the population have repeatedly shown willingness to support increases in troop size and defence expenditure following major international events such as the 2001 terrorist attacks or the 2014 annexation of Crimea. A lot of these shifts are closely associated with changing threat perceptions, analogous to other countries.[54]

Fig. 4: Public support for increased troop levels and defense expenditure

[53] Timo Graf, *Was bleibt von der Zeitenwende in den Köpfen? Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2023* (Potsdam: ZMSBw, 2024); Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsansgt und Kriegstauglichkeit;* Graf et al., *Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild*, note 51 above.

[54] Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst und Kriegstauglichkeit.*

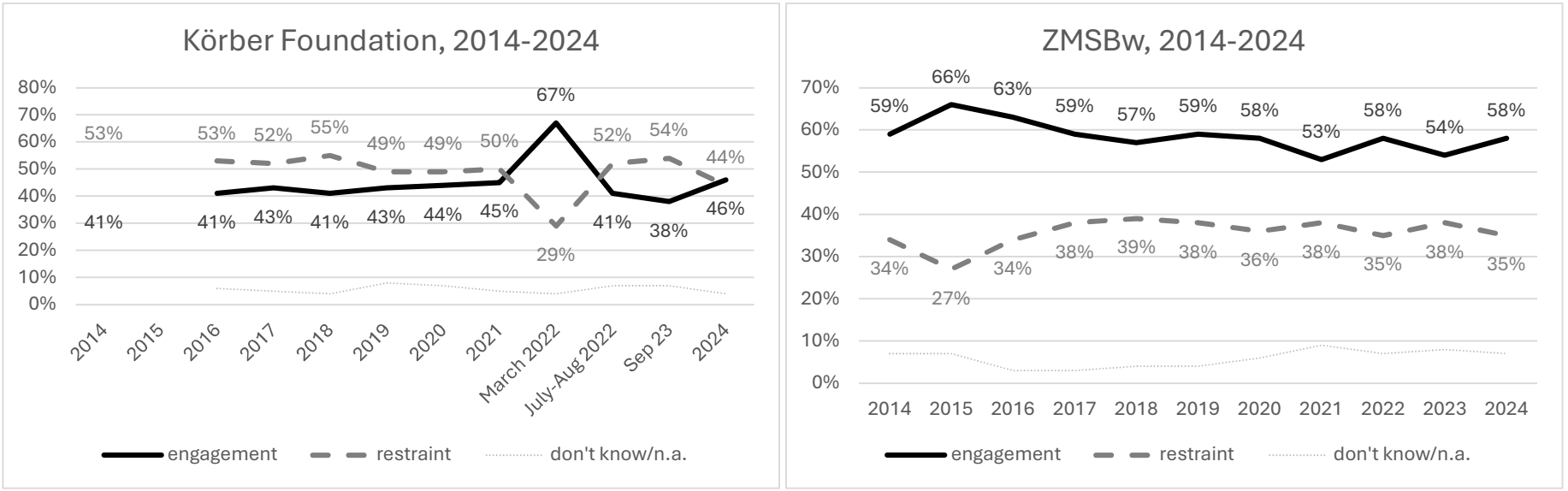


Author's illustration based on ZMSBw data[55]

Neither are Germans universally opposed to active involvement in international affairs, including with military means. Scholars often draw on survey data by the Körber Foundation to show that relatively stable majorities favour restraint in international crises. However, a more ambiguous picture emerges when we contrast these findings with survey data collected by ZMSBw. Fig. 5 below shows the results of surveys by both Körber and ZMSBw between 2014 (the beginning of the Crimea crisis) and 2024. Whilst data collected by the Körber Foundation shows a relatively constant majority in favour of restraint (except for the direct aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and again in 2024), ZMSBw data shows stable majorities in favour of engagement (the picture is more mixed before 2014). Whilst much of this discrepancy likely comes down to differences in methodology (responses can vary depending on the wording of survey items, the time period, sample, etc.), it is far from clear that most Germans want to keep out of international problem-solving.

[55] Timo Graf, *Zeitenwende im sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitischen Meinungsbild. Ergebnisse der ZMSBw-Bevölkerungsbefragung 2022*, Forschungsbericht no. 133 (Potsdam: ZMSBw, 2022); Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst Und Kriegstauglichkeit*; Graf et al., *Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild*, note 51 above.

Fig. 5: Public attitudes towards engagement vs. restraint



Author's illustration based on Körber Foundation and ZMSBw data[56]

[56] Körber-Stiftung, *Einmischen oder zurückhalten? Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Umfrage von TNS Infratest Politikforschung zur Sicht der Deutschen auf die Außenpolitik* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2014); Körber-Stiftung, *The Berlin Pulse* 2017-2024 (Hamburg, Körber-Stiftung); Graf, *Was bleibt von der Zeitenwende;* Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst und Kriegstauglichkeit*; Graf et al., *Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild*, note 51 above.

Also more specifically with respect to military operations abroad – the heart of anti-militarism – public opinion is to be much more differentiated than one might expect, at least according to ZMSBw data. On one hand, when asked about different foreign-policy instruments, support for non-military instruments − such as diplomacy (85%), arms control (71%), or development aid (70%) − is much stronger than for military means, in line with an anti-militarist culture. On the other hand, when asked about the *Bundeswehr*'s mission spectrum, majorities support in principle a broad range of tasks, ranging from national defence (87% in favour) and the support of allies who are under attack (74%) to genocide prevention (70%), crisis management (59%), and counter-terrorism (65%). Still 47% of respondents – a relative majority – supports combat operations abroad as a legitimate part of the *Bundeswehr*'s mission spectrum.[57] Initially, even the controversial Afghanistan operation was supported by a majority of the public, which only soured on the mission when the security situation deteriorated and the mission's success increasingly seemed in doubt. Importantly, as Timo Graf has shown based on ZMSBw data, the general public's attitude was closely aligned with Afghanistan veterans' position on the war.[58] Even keeping in mind that survey results have to be taken with a grain of salt, because they can vary depending on methodological decisions, these empirical results are as difficult to explain against the background of an allegedly rather stable and influential anti-militarist culture as is foreign policy elites' changed stance.

Constructivists have tried to account for this somewhat puzzling development by proposing theoretical models to account for ideational change. As noted above, they have argued that strategic culture changes primarily in an incremental fashion, whereas fundamental change only occurs following major exogenous shocks such as lost wars, revolutions or, more generally, the "experience of warfare".[59] Outside of such shocks, incremental change is understood as an often reluctant adaptation to a changed

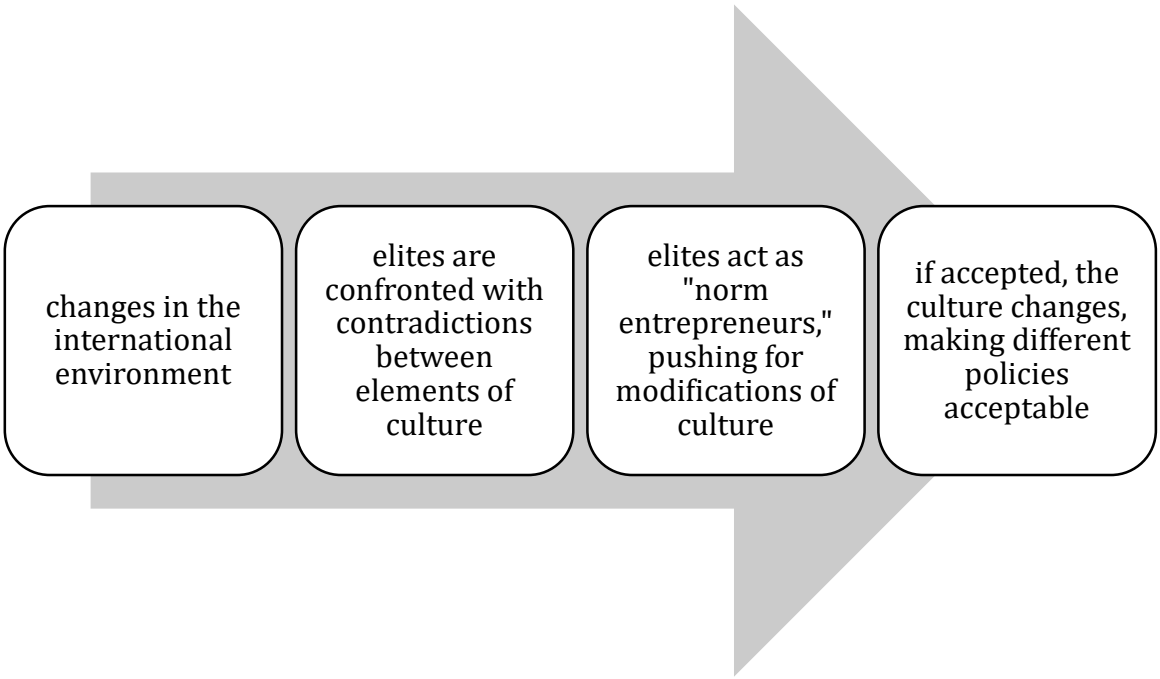
[57] Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst und Kriegstauglichkeit.*

[58] Patrick A. Mello, "German Parliamentary Debates and Decision-Making on Afghanistan," *Orient* 63, no. 1 (2022): 44-49; Timo Graf, „Freundliches Desinteresse Als Bilanz? Die Einstellung Der Deutschen Zum Bundeswehreinsatz in Afghanistan Auf Dem Prüfstand," *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 14, no. 4 (2021): 411-36.

[59] Antti Seppo, *From Guilt to Responsibility and Beyond: The Evolution of German Strategic Culture after the End of the Cold War*, (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2020), 87.

security environment.[60] More recently, scholars have begun to modify this model, highlighting the importance of foreign policy elites that, forced into action by contradictions between different elements of culture (such as between anti-militarism and multi-lateralism), act as "norm entrepreneurs," advocating for ideational change (see fig. 6 below).[61]

Figure 6: Cultural change



Author's illustration, based on Sakaki et al.[62]

Such an understanding of cultural change is arguably also at the heart of many predictions regarding German security policy that assume that some external development will (finally) shock Germany sufficiently to abandon its "pacifist" or anti-militarist culture and become a "normal" state (whatever that might mean).[63] From this theoretical perspective, one would expect debates about anti-militarism and the German past to become less pronounced and German foreign policy more assertive.

[60] Thomas U. Berger, "A Perfectly Normal Abnormality," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 2 (2002), 173-193; Blumenau, "Breaking with convention"; Nicole Koenig, "Leading Beyond Civilian Power: Germany's Role Re-conception in European Crisis Management," *German Politics* 29, no. 1 (2020), 79-98.

[61] Sakaki et al., *Reluctant Warriors*, 10.

[62] Sakaki et al., *Reluctant Warriors*.

[63] Beverly Crawford, "The Normative Power of a Normal State: Power and Revolutionary Vision in Germany's Post-Wall Foreign Policy," *German Politics & Society* 28, no. 2 (2010): 165-84; Philip H. Gordon, "The

So far, this expectation has not born out by empirical reality. While at first glance the gradually increased participation of the *Bundeswehr* in multinational military operations during 1990s and 2000s appears consistent with linear ideational change, a closer look reveals the story is more complicated in at least two respects. First, contrary to the expectation of normalisation, debates about Germany's "proper" role in light of both the country's past and its international responsibility keep coming up every time the Bundestag has to vote on new deployments, with discourse participants arguing over the "correct" way to interpret the "lessons of history". Here, debates about Afghanistan in the 2000s and 2010s closely resemble arguments familiar from debates about German participation in the military operations in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia in the early and mid-1990s.[64] With respect to Germany's controversial decision to abstain from a vote on Libya, Sarah Brockmeier has argued that this was primarily due to a lack of time to sufficiently debate the issue.[65] If antimilitarist norms were really weakening in a linear fashion, we would expect to simply see less debate about them. That has not been happening in the debates about out-of-area operations.

Instead, second, the meaning of anti-militarism has been changing, making previously unacceptable practices acceptable. What we see is that political leaders continue to stress their basic commitment to military restraint but instead of then arguing against sending troops they advocate *for* a deployment, claiming that all other means have in fact been exhausted. From a soft constructivist point of view, this should simply not happen. Either anti-militarist norms have weakened, allowing for increased military engagement, or they have not and should constrain actors from sending troops on military operations. As a result, what the "culture of restraint" means changes. While it once was opposed to military operations, it now allowed for them as long as other means had been exhausted (which, of course, is open to interpretation). Anti-militarism now coexists with the very foreign policy behaviour it was once said to be incompatible with.[66]

Normalization of German Foreign Policy," *Orbis* 38, no. 2 (1994): 225-44; Regina Karp, "Germany: A 'Normal' Global Actor?," *German Politics* 18, no. 1 (2009): 12 – 35.

[64] See Stengel, *The Politics of Military Force.*

[65] See Sarah Brockmeier, "Germany and the Intervention in Libya," *Survival* 55, no. 6 (2013), 63-90.

[66] Frank A. Stengel, "The Political Production of Ethical War: Rethinking the Ethics/Politics Nexus with Laclau," *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no. 3 (2019): 230-42.

Instead of anti-militarist norms adapting to "reality" in a linear fashion, either in the form of a gradual adaptation or more rapid policy change in response to external shocks,[67] what we see is a much more complicated, inconsistent, even contradictory and less predictable process.

This is reflected in policies that at times seem less coherent. One example is Germany's policy in the "war on terror." Shortly after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, Chancellor Schröder declared Germany's "unconditional solidarity" with the United States, committing troops to Operation Enduring Freedom and later the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, only to place "notoriously tight restrictions" on the mission regarding its area of operations (limited to Regional Command-North, effectively preventing reinforcing allies) and the use of force (prohibiting any offensive operations), as well as emphatically refusing any involvement in the Iraq war.[68] Even after the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in 2006 and after, leadership in the Federal Ministry of Defence only reluctantly accepted the changing circumstances.[69] This was accompanied by a painful dance to keep up the appearance that German soldiers in Afghanistan were essentially "armed social workers" and not at all involved in war.[70] This way, a mission that at least from 2009 onwards involved killing and dying, was represented in such a way that it at least found some uneasy coexistence with anti-militarism.[71]

---

[67] The scare quotes indicate that from a constructivist perspective, the very idea of an adaptation to an objective reality is a problematic assumption, given that the "social construction of reality" is *the* bedrock assumption of constructivism. Instead of taking "external shocks" for granted, a theoretically rigorous social constructivist perspective would have to zoom in on how some events are constructed as crises while others are not. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1991); see Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism and International Relations," in *Handbook of International Relations*, eds. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (London et al.: Sage, 2002), pp. 95-118; Wesley W. Widmaier, Mark Blyth, and Leonard Seabrooke, "Exogeneous Shocks or Endogeneous Constructions? The Meanings of Wars and Crises," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2007): 747-59.

[68] Stephen M. Saideman and David P. Auerswald, "Comparing Caveats: Understanding the Sources of National Restrictions upon NATO's Mission in Afghanistan," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012), 69; see also Patrick A. Mello, "German Parliamentary Debates and Decision-Making on Afghanistan"; Jakub Eberle, *Discourse and Affect*.

[69] Noetzel, "The German politics of war". In his detailed study on Afghanistan, Philipp Münch shows that many decisions on Afghanistan were often influenced by factors other than the specific situation on the ground. See Münch, *Die Bundeswehr in Afghanistan. Militärische Handlungslogik in internationalen Interventionen* (Freiburg i. Br.: Rombach Verlag, 2015).

[70] Anna Geis, "The Ambivalence of (Not) Being in a 'War': The 'Civilian Power' Germany and the 'Stabilization Operation' in Afghanistan," in *Concepts at Work. On the Linguistic Infrastructure of World Politics*, ed. Piki Ish-Shalom (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 75.

[71] 2009 not only marks the first German soldier killed in a gun fight since 1945 but also the Kunduz airstrike that, ordered by a German staff officer, included high civilian casualties. See Heck, *Der Luftangriff von Kundus*.

This tracks much closer with a discursive approach that does not conceive of "ideational" factors like anti-militarism as stable constraints with a more or less fixed "essence", but instead emphasises their fluidity, contingency, and context-dependence.[72] From this perspective, what the "culture of restraint," "alliance solidarity", or Germany's "responsibility" mean and what the lessons of history demand Germany do in a particular situation – be it the threat of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the 2001 terrorist attacks or the Russian invasion of Ukraine − is the contingent result of discursive struggles between competing interpretations of reality, in which the outcome is not predetermined. Rather than constraining policy by ruling out certain courses of action, the "right thing to do" has to be justified in each individual case in light of the normative principles underpinning Germany's foreign policy identity, such as anti-militarism, multi-lateralism and Western integration. This gives discourse participants, and in particular "privileged storytellers" like the federal chancellor or the relevant cabinet members (mainly defence and foreign affairs) significant wiggle room in interpreting what is the right course of action.[73]

4 *Zeitenwende* Zigzags

Moreover, post-*Zeitenwende* German security policy appears more like policy "zigzags" than either continuity or a clear break with anti-militarism in response to the external shock of the Russian invasion.[74] Instead, German policy was marked by first rather grandiose declarations regarding both Germany's future role in European defence and Berlin's support for Ukraine, followed by hesitant implementation and half-measures, accompanied by months of hand-wringing and lengthy debates.

[72] For examples of such discursive approaches to German foreign and security policy, see Baumann, *Der Wandel des deutschen Multilateralismus*; Jakub Eberle, *Discourse and Affect*; Dirk Nabers, *Allianz gegen den Terror. Deutschland, Japan und die USA* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005); Stengel, *The Politics of Military Force;* Maximilian Tkocz and Holger Stritzel, "Articulating Change and Responsibility: Identity, Memory, and the Use of Historical Narratives in German Parliamentary Debates on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *German Politics* 34, no. 1 (2023): 183-206; Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations*.

[73] David Campbell, *Politics without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics, and the Narratives of the Gulf War* (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1993), 7; Kai Oppermann and Alexander Höse, "Die innenpolitischen Restriktionen deutscher Außenpolitik," in *Deutsche Außenpolitik*, eds. Thomas Jäger, Alexander Höse, and Kai Oppermann (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011): 44-76; Stengel, *The Politics of Military Force*.

[74] Daniel S. Hamilton, "Germany's Zeitenwende Zigzags: A View from the United States," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, no. 4 (2023), https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-zeitenwende-zigzags-view-united-states.

4.1 European Defence

To begin with, leading politicians of the (since prematurely dissolved) "traffic light" coalition between the SPD, the Green Party and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) themselves created the expectation of a major strategic reorientation.[75] In his *Zeitenwende* speech three days after the invasion, Chancellor Scholz (SPD) declared that Putin had created "a new reality" that "requires a clear response" and announced that Germany would do "whatever is needed to secure the peace in Europe".[76] Quite similarly, Finance Minister Christian Lindner (FDP) argued that Germany had awakened from its "self-righteous dream."[77] Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Greens) even went further, arguing that the war made it "necessary that we draw anew the foundations of our foreign policy action" and pondered the question of whether Germany would have to abandon its "reticence in foreign and security policy." According to her, nothing less than an "about-face in foreign policy" was required.[78] To back this up, the federal government announced a €100bn special fund for investments into the *Bundeswehr*'s force readiness and committed themselves annually to "invest more than 2 percent of the gross domestic product into our defence".[79] Just a week before the Russian invasion, none of these decisions had had a majority among the coalition.[80] Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has been calling for the *Bundeswehr* to become "fit for war," a notable uptick in terms of martial language.[81] Germany has also committed to station permanently a combat brigade in Lithuania and started an initiative for a joint European missile defence.[82] To tackle the *Bundeswehr's* chronic personnel problems – it has struggled with recruitment

---

[75] See Frank Decker, "Nach dem Ende der Ampel. Erwägungen zu der vorgezogenen Bundestagswahl 2025," *Gesellschaft - Wirtschaft – Politik*, online first (2025), doi: 10.3224/gwp.v74i1.01.

[76] Scholz, "Regierungserklärung," 1351-1352. However, as Axel Heck has shown, only weeks after his original *Zeitenwende* speech Chancellor Scholz significantly backpaddled from his original tough rhetoric. See Heck, "Ready, Steady, No?"

[77] Christian Lindner, "Rede vor dem Deutschen Bundestag," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 20th legislative period, 19th session, 27 February 2022, 1362.

[78] Annalena Baerbock, „Rede vor dem Deutschen Bundestag," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 20th legislative period, 19th session, 27 February 2022, 1358, 1359.

[79] See Scholz, "Regierungserklärung," 1353.

[80] Patrick Keller, "Zeitenwende," *Internationale Politik Quarterly* 1 May 2022, https://internationalepolitik.de/de/zeitenwende-3.

[81] Boris Pistorius, "Befragung der Bundesregierung," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 20th legislative period, 171st session, June 5, 2024, 22037.

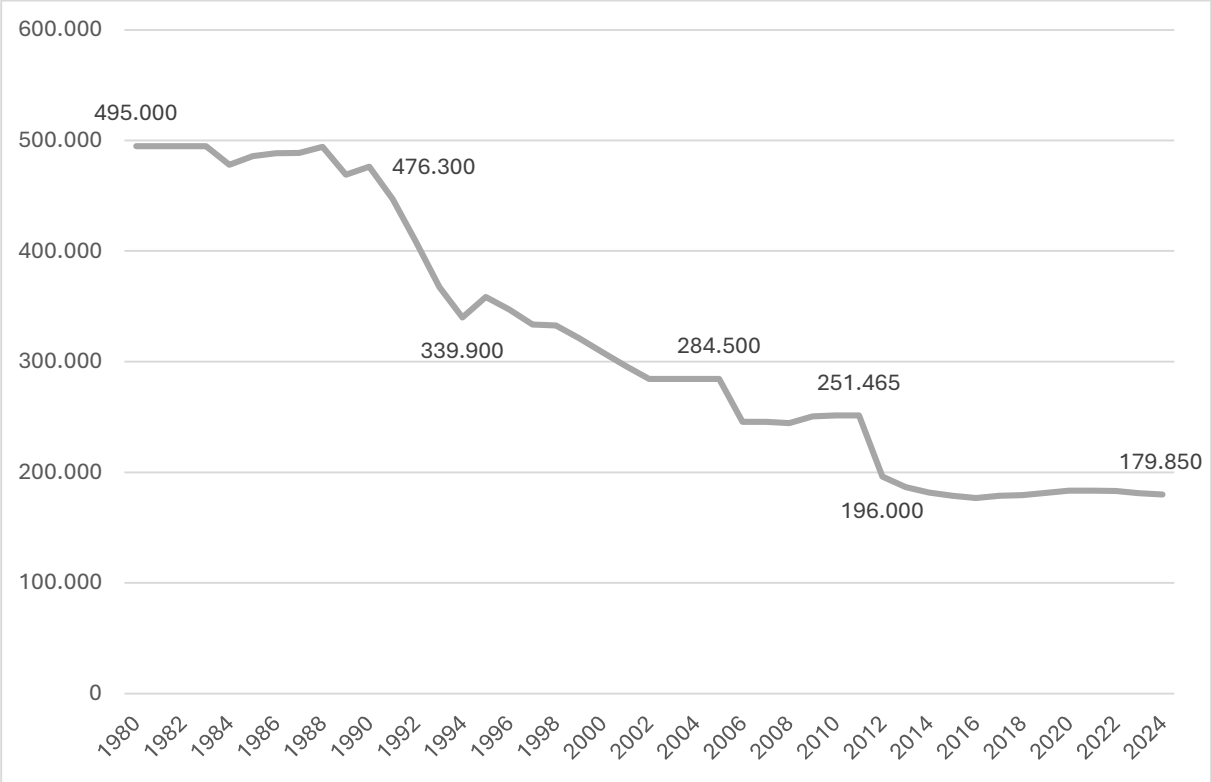
[82] Jürgen Fischer, "Vorkommando der Panzerbrigade 45 unterwegs nach Litauen," *Europäische Sicherheit & Technik*, April 8, 2024, https://esut.de/2024/04/meldungen/48744/vorkommando-der-panzerbrigade45-

and falls significantly short of the goal of at least 230,000 soldiers (see fig. 7 below)−, German leaders have discussed the reintroduction of conscription (which had been suspended in 2011) in some form.[83]

unterwegs-nach-litauen/; Ben Tallis, *The End of the Zeitenwende* (Berlin: DGAP, 2024), https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/end-zeitenwende.

[83] The number of 230,000 active soldiers is on the low end of what will be required. It is likely that the troop strength has to be significantly higher for the Bundeswehr to fulfill its obligations within NATO. See Carlo Masala, "Kein Geld, kein Personal, keine Sicherheit," *Internationale Politik* 80, no. 2 (2025): 24-7.

Fig. 7: Active military personnel, 1980-2024



Author's illustration based on IISS data[84]

On the other hand, the practical implementation of Chancellor Scholz's *Zeitenwende* has raised doubts regarding Germany's actual willingness to do "whatever is needed" with respect to European defence. Three years in, the *Zeitenwende* lost much of its lustre.[85] Whilst the special fund has given the *Bundeswehr* much-needed financial flexibility to solve some of the most urgent short-term problems (such as such as the notorious lack of ammunition and the absence of modern personal protective gear), and to set much delayed procurement processes for new weapons systems in motion, rearmament proceeds too slowly and the structural deficit in the defence budget remains unresolved.[86] Despite the traffic light coalition's announcements, the defence budget has only increased marginally to €52bn in

[84] IISS, *The Military Balance 1981−2025*.

[85] Bastian Giegerich and Ben Schreer, "Zeitenwende One Year On," *Survival* 65, no. 2 (2023): 37-42; Hamilton, „Germany's Zeitenwende Zigzags"; Stephen F. Szabo, "Germany's Strategic Reorientations, Present and Past," *Survival* 65, no. 4 (2023): 31-9.

[86] Guntram B. Wolff et al., *Fit for War in Decades: Europe's and Germany's Slow Rearmament vis-a-vis Russia*, Kiel Report no. 1 (Kiel: Institute for the World Economy, 2024).

2024 (meeting the 2% goal would have required €85bn).[87] This is aggravated by high running costs and the fact that the procurement projects that have recently been put in motion will continue to produce costs after the special fund runs out in 2027.[88] Despite that, the traffic light coalition has not been able to make systematic plans for the time after 2027, which puts the modernisation of the *Bundeswehr* as a long-term project somewhat in doubt.[89] In addition, experts have criticized the lack of strategic thinking with respect to defence industrial aspects of the *Zeitenwende*.[90]

This development cannot be explained by public reluctance due to some widespread anti-militarist sentiments. Based on ZMSBw data, absolute majorities of the public support increasing both the defence budget and troop sizes (see fig. 4 above).[91] 74% of respondents support continued German NATO membership, 70% back meeting the financial obligations associated with it, and 51% are in favour of German military support for the Baltic states. Relative majorities support the stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons on German soil (44%), NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania (45%) and air policing in the Baltics (46%).[92] Relative majorities also consider the reintroducing some form of military service necessary, and an absolute majority of German men under the age of 50 (61%) would be willing to defend the country.[93] Unsurprisingly, these developments are closely associated with changed threat perceptions regarding Russia.[94] As the discussion above has shown, the culture of restraint did not

[87] Masala, „Kein Geld"; Christian Mölling and Torben Schütz, *Verteidigungshaushalt 2024*, DGAP Memo no. 2 (Berlin: DGAP, 2023), https://dgap.org/de/forschung/publikationen/verteidigungshaushalt-2024.

[88] See Mölling and Schütz, *Verteidigungshaushalt 2024*. To the extent that troop numbers are to increase in the future, so will the running costs.

[89] This stands in stark contrast to Poland's much more ambitious rearmament program. See Tallis, *The End of the Zeitenwende*.

[90] Heiko Borchert, Torben Schütz, and Joseph Verbovszky, "'Unchain My Heart:' A Defense Industrial Policy Agenda for Germany's Zeitenwende," *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 15, no. 4 (2022), pp. 429-450.

[91] It should be noted, however, that evidence from a recent survey experiment shows that support for defense expenditure generally declines moderately when costs are mentioned, but this dynamic is not specific to Germany. See Matthias Mader et al., "Crumbling in the Face of Cost? How Cost Considerations Affect Public Support for European Security and Defence Cooperation," *European Union Politics* 25, no. 3 (2024): 483-503.

[92] Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst und Kriegstauglichkeit*.

[93] 49% of respondents support military service as one option within a mandatory period of civic duty, 46% support the reintroduction of conscription. See Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst und Kriegstauglichkeit*.

[94] See Timo Graf, Markus Steinbrecher, and Heiko Biehl, "From Reluctance to Reassurance: Explaining the Shift in the Germans' Nato Alliance Solidarity Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Contemporary Security Policy* 45, no. 2 (2024): 298-330; Matthias Mader, "Increased Support for Collective Defence in Times of Threat: European Public Opinion before and after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Policy Studies* 45, no. 3-4 (2024): 402-22; Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Index 2023*, (Munich: Munich Security Conference, 2023), https://securityconference.org/assets/01_Bilder_Inhalte/03_Medien/02_Publikationen/2023/Munich_Security_Index_2023.pdf.

prevent either much higher levels of defence spending, or significantly larger troop levels during the Cold War, not even compulsory military service.

A much more convincing explanation for the mismatch between rhetoric and policy implementation is due to at least three factors: First, German policy-makers seem reluctant to burden the public out of fear that voters will punish them at the ballot box. This tendency to avoid asking anything of the public seems particularly distinctive with Chancellor Scholz who since his time as mayor of Hamburg has been infamous for his risk-averse leadership style and a controlled rhetorical style that brought him the unflattering nickname "Scholz-o-maton".[95] Second, the need to ramp up defence expenditures coincided with severe economic challenges brought about by the pandemic, the loss of cheap Russian gas and the big Chinese export market, in addition to other policy problems, like climate change.[96] Third, the need for compromise within the German political system with not only coalition governments but comparatively independent ministers make it more difficult than in other countries to push through policies against opposition. The need to govern by consensus does not necessarily favour swift decision-making, and the coalition had fundamentally different policy priorities.[97] Specifically, Finance Minister Lindner's insistence on keeping the debt break (*Schuldenbremse*) in place severely restricted the coalition's financial wiggle room and ultimately triggered the break-up of the coalition.[98] An initiative to fund increased European defence spending by issuing EU bonds was also shut down by Berlin, potentially also due to the FDP's insistence on fiscal austerity.[99] Fourth, political decision-making in general is, to a much greater degree than commonly acknowledged, characterised by routines, incrementalism, or even just (sub-incrementalistic) coping, inertia, improvisation, muddling through,

[95] See "Sie nannten ihn ‚Scholzomat' – wie es dazu kam," *Hamburger Abendblatt*, December 11, 2021, https://www.abendblatt.de/hamburg/article234060455/Sie-nannten-ihn-Scholzomat-wie-es-dazu-kam.html.

[96] Decker, "Nach dem Ende der Ampel;" Dmitri Stratievski, "Collapse by numbers," *International Politics and Society*, November 14, 2024, https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/collapse-by-numbers-7922/.

[97] Joeseph Verbovszky, *German Structural Pacifism: Cultural Trauma and German Security Policy since Reunification* (Cham: Springer, 2024).

[98] Decker,"Nach dem Ende der Ampel." In that sense, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and in particular bureaucratic politics approaches, might provide more insight here than constructivist ones. See Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications," *World Politics* 24, no. 1 (1972): 40-79.

[99] Tallis, *The End of the Zeitenwende*.

and *Aussitzen* (sitting something out).[100] Jonas Driedger suggests that inertia and reactiveness are particularly pronounced features of German policy making.[101]

4.2 Ukraine Aid

Similarly, German commitment to Ukraine has been a mixed bag. On the plus side, over the past three years Germany has gradually committed itself to supplying ever more weapons systems to Ukraine, including infantry fighting vehicles, main battle tanks *Leopard* and *Leopard 2*, self-propelled howitzers *Panzerhaubitze* 2000, *Gepard* self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, IRIS-T and PATRIOT air defence systems, and multiple rocket launchers MARS II.[102] Indeed, over time and in absolute terms, Germany has evolved as one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine.[103] As was the case with out-of-area operations during the 1990s, also on German defence and Ukraine aid the Greens have been most willing to adapt, with Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck stating that if he had to choose again today he would not refuse to serve in the *Bundeswehr* anymore and advocated for spending more than 2 percent of the GDP on defence.[104]

However, not only is the decision to deliver arms to a conflict zone not as radical a departure as the government made it out to be,[105] but Berlin has only haltingly and reluctantly implemented its full-throated announcement to support Ukraine. From the early embarrassment over the delivery of helmets to the painful to watch "heavy weapons" discussion in the spring of 2022 to the on-going controversy

---

[100] See Uwe Schimank, *Entscheiden. Ein soziologisches Brevier* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022).

[101] See Jonas J. Driedger, "Inertia and Reactiveness in Germany's Russia Policy From the 2021 Federal Election to the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022," *German Politics and Society* 40, no. 4 (2022): 135-51 as well as Mariano Barbato, *Wetterwechsel. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Scholz* , 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2025).

[102] Federal Government, "Military support for Ukraine," Bundesregierung.de, February 17, 2025, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/military-support-ukraine-2054992.

[103] Christian Trebesch et al., *The Ukraine Support Tracker: Which Countries Help Ukraine and How?* Kiel Working Papers no. 2218 (Kiel: Institute for the World Economy, 2023).

[104] "Habeck will deutlich höhere Verteidigungsausgaben," ZDF.de, January 3, 2025, https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/habeck-ausgaben-verteidigung-100.html.

[105] Germany has exported arms to numerous countries, including ones who have ignored the norms of international humanitarian law. See William Glenn Gray, "Waffen aus Deutschland? Bundestag, Rüstungshilfe und Waffenexport 1961 bis 1975," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 64, no. 2 (2016): 327-64; Hendrik Platte and Dirk Leuffen, "German Arms Exports: Between Normative Aspirations and Political Reality," *German Politics* 25, no. 4 (2016): 561-80; Simone Wisotzki, *German Arms Exports to the World? Taking Stock of the Past 30 Years*, PRIF Report 7/2020 (Frankfurt am Main: PRIF, 2020).

about the potential delivery of *Taurus* cruise missiles, decisions have been slow. Chancellor Scholz in particular has been dragging his feet on almost every single decision regarding individual weapons systems and insisted on acting in lockstep with the United States. Scholz has even refused to state that a Ukrainian victory is the desired goal, instead merely saying that Russia must not win.[106] He has repeatedly cited the goal to prevent any "escalation" of the war and pointed to the public expectation that German leaders keep "a level head."[107]

What remains unclear, however, is whether Scholz is responding to widespread anti-militarism among the general public or whether the public is taking cues from Scholz. Polls show that the German public has not altogether abandoned anti-militarism, and like Scholz a majority of the public does in fact oppose the delivery of *Taurus* cruise missiles .[108] The public is also split on whether Germany should assume a leadership role within NATO (34% pro versus 32% contra).[109] Having said that, public backing for Germany to support Ukraine militarily has grown from 2023 to 2024, raising doubt to what extent actual public sentiment is the reason for Scholz's hesitance.[110] The debate about the *Taurus* cruise missile illustrates how difficult it is to separate cause and effect. In this context Scholz's public determination not to deliver the system is noteworthy, not least because he not only could not (or refused to) explain his reasoning, but also because his own coalition partners sharply criticised him for it.[111] As noted above, the government, and in particular the chancellor, enjoy a privileged speaker position in matters of security. Given that not every German citizen is − in stark contrast to football − an expert on weapons

[106] Tallis, *The End of the Zeitenwende*.

[107] Scholz, "Befragung der Bundesregierung," Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll, 20th legislative period, 202nd session, 4 December 2024, 26024; "Scholz legt sich in 'Taurus'-Debatte nicht fest," *Tagesschau*, 13 August 2023, https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/scholz-taurus-100.html.

[108] See Alexandra Dienes and Christos Katsioulis, *Zeitenwende* (Wien: FES Regional Office for International Cooperation, 2022), p. 8. https://peace.fes.de/e/new-publication-zeitenwende-russias-war-as-a-turning-point-in-german-public-opinion; Matthias Mader and Harald Schoen, "No Zeitenwende (yet): Early Assessment of German Public Opinion Toward Foreign and Defense Policy After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 64, no. 3 (2023), pp. 525-547; "Mehrheit gegen deutsche Taurus-Lieferung an die Ukraine," *WDR.de*, November 21, 2024, https://presse.wdr.de/plounge/tv/das_erste/2024/11/20241121_deutschlandtrend_taurus_lieferung.html.

[109] Graf, *Zwischen Kriegsangst und Kriegstauglichkeit*.

[110] Ibid.

[111] "Scharfe Kritik an Scholz' Entscheidung," *Tagesschau*, October 5, 2023, https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/taurus-entscheidung-scholz-kritik-100.html.

systems, it is reasonable to assume that opposition to *Taurus* specifically is due to elite cues.[112] This suggests that political leaders (norm entrepreneurs in constructivist parlance) have significantly more leeway than the notion of a static and constraining culture of reticence would assume.

Instead, what we can observe is a back and forth, as elites (as well as the general public) try to figure out in discursive struggles what abstract normative principles like anti-militarism, or multi-lateralism should mean for specific foreign policy decisions. This is why debates about Germany's commitment to peace and military restraint have not vanished: each and every decision requires that it be situated within the normative framework that regulates the space of acceptable foreign policy behaviour. German security policy after the *Zeitenwende* continues to be marked by struggles over how to interpret reality (e.g., the war and its causes), over the lessons of history, Germany's proper role in the 21st century, and indeed what anti-militarism, multi-lateralism, etc. mean in the context of the Ukraine war. This is aptly demonstrated by Jakub Eberle's analysis, in which he demonstrates how political leaders use their commitment to peace (consistent with anti-militarism) to make the case *for*, instead of against, arms deliveries. As Eberle rightly points out, such statements do not reject anti-militarism, but change its meaning, thus "allowing, even sanctioning militarized policies."[113] This apparent self-contradiction is something constructivist models cannot adequately account for due to their assumption that culture has a fixed meaning. Rather than conceiving of anti-militarism as a more or less static norm with a fixed essence, observers of German security policy should see it as the contingent, context-dependent and fluid result of continuous discursive struggles over meaning, more in line with discursive approaches.

While Scholz's refusal to act independent of Washington is consistent with a cultural explanation due to a deeply engrained commitment to Western integration and multi-lateralism, as well as a long-standing reluctance among German elites to lead, the government's hesitance is at least in part due to factors other than cultural constraints.[114] Scholz's position, and in particular the way decisions were

[112] See Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Elites in the Making and Breaking of Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2022): 219-40.

[113] Jakub Eberle, "Understanding German Foreign Policy in the (Post-)Merkel Era—Review Essay," *International Studies Review* 25, no. 2 (2023), doi: 10.1093/isr/viad007.

[114] Lisbeth Aggestam and Adrian Hyde-Price, "Learning to Lead? Germany and the Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy," *German Politics* 29, no. 1 (2020), pp. 8-24,; Antti Seppo and Iulia-Sabina Joja, "The struggle of a Kantian Power in a Lockean World – German Leadership in Security and Defence Policy," *Defense & Security Analysis* 35, no. 4 (2019), pp. 384-405; Tallis, "What Zeitenwende?"

made, can be explained by, again, his risk-averse leadership style, in combination with backlash not from the general public, but from his own party. For the SPD not only remains split on military matters, but it also has a long tradition of seeking co-operative relations with Moscow (*Ostpolitik*) and functioning as a bridge between the West and Russia that is hard to shake.[115]

5 The Future of German "Pacifism"

This article made three central arguments with the aim of complementing and adding nuance to the unfolding debates about post-*Zeitenwende* German security policy. First, it placed recent policy shift under Chancellor Scholz in the context of German security policy during the Cold War to add some additional perspective on the degree of radicality of the shift, ultimately arguing that although there are significant shifts in public attitudes, claims of a departure from Germany's civilian power role might be overblown. Second, the article discussed the changing German policy on out-of-area operations to show that with respect to anti-militarism, the culture of restraint or Germany's civilian power role, the most relevant shift happened not following the *Zeitenwende,* but in the 1990s and 2000s, at the beginning of which German participation in multinational operations outside of NATO was deemed unconstitutional and politically unacceptable and at the end of which Germany was *de facto* fighting a war in Afghanistan. Third, based on a discussion of out-of-area operations as well as the *Zeitenwende*, the article makes the case for a discursive approach that is more suited to capturing the fluidity, convertibility and context-dependence of the ideational, or cultural factors that conventional constructivist approaches usually consider to be constant.[116]

Such an approach highlights that anti-militarism does not simply constrain German foreign policy behaviour for all eternity, keeping Germany from ever playing a more active leadership role in European

[115] Fix, *Germany's Role in European Russia Policy*; Thomas Jäger, "Handlungsspielräume deutscher Sicherheitspolitik nach Russlands Angriff auf die Ukraine 2022," *SIRIUS – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen* 8, no. 2 (2024): 119-42; Joachim Krause, "Germany's 'Ostpolitik' until Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," in *Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: "Zeitenwende" for German Security Policy*, eds. Stefan M. A. Hansen, Olha Husieva, and Kira Frankenthal (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2023); Szabo, "Germany's Strategic Reorientations".

[116] See Nabers and Stengel, "Crisis and change." Ideally, such an approach brings in insights also from FPA to account for leadership styles, bureaucratic politics, etc. In that sense, the argument made here ties in with Klaus Brummer's call to incorporate more insights from critical IR into FPA. See Klaus Brummer, "Toward a (More) Critical FPA," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 1 (2021), doi: 10.1093/fpa/orab031.

security. But neither have German elites, or the public been ”shocked” out of their slumber and are now ready to abandon any anti-militarist constraints. Instead, Germans will for the foreseeable future continue to argue over, grapple and come to grips with their role in the world. Thus, Germany’s allies will have to get used to Berlin being a bit complicated, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on who is in charge.

The future of the *Zeitenwende* will depend to a large extent on the willingness of the next government to stick its neck out. On the plus side, Chancellor *in spe* Friedrich Merz, whose conservative Christian Democratic Union won the recent *Bundestag* elections, has been much more vocal about strengthening German defence than Scholz. Moreover, U.S. President Donald Trump’s recent *de facto* abandonment of America’s European allies in favour of Russia puts increasing pressure on Europeans to get their act together.[117] Already during his campaign, Trump announced that he would encourage Russia to “do whatever the hell they want” to any NATO member that does not spend as much on defence as Trump himself deems necessary, and in February 2025, he claimed that the Ukrainians “should have never started” the war, as if they had not been the victim of Russian aggression.[118] Trump’s Vice President J.D. Vance spent the bulk of his speech at the 2025 Munich Security Conference disparaging European governments for fighting far-right authoritarian movements instead of embracing them, calling that a greater threat than Russia, all the while Trump administration itself was busy dismantling democratic institutions at home.[119] It is clear that the new administration’s loyalties lie not with Europe, but with Moscow, which should put additional pressure on the Europeans to sort things out on their end.

---

[117] Constanze Stelzenmüller, “Die Lage ist ernst, nehmen Sie sie auch ernst!,” *Internationale Politik* 80, no. 2 (2025): 61-3; Jan Techau, “Die Realität ist schmerzhaft, aber zumutbar,” *Internationale Politik* 80, no. 2 (2025): 18-23; Eva Rieger, “A Manchurian Candidate? The GOP’s Discourse on the Russian War in Ukraine,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, online first (2024), doi: 10.1007/s11615-024-00558-7.

[118] Katie Sullivan, “Trump Says He Would Encourage Russia to ‘Do Whatever the Hell They Want’ to Any NATO Country That Doesn’t Pay Enough,” *CNN.com*, February 11, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html; Jakub Krupa and Pjotr Sauer, “Factchecking Donald Trump’s Claims about the War in Ukraine,” *The Guardian*, February 19, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/19/factchecking-donald-trump-claims-war-ukraine.

[119] See Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “The Path to American Authoritarianism,” *Foreign Affairs* February 11, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/path-american-authoritarianism-trump. Vance himself once feared Trump might become “America’s Hitler,” but has since abandoned any principles in favor of naked political ambition. See Gram Slattery and Helen Coster, “JD Vance Once Compared Trump to Hitler. Now, He Is Trump's Vice President-elect,” *Reuters.com*, November 6, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/jd-vance-once-compared-trump-hitler-now-they-are-running-mates-2024-07-15/.

Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to expect wonders from Merz either. This is not primarily due to any anti-militarist constraints, but the fact that he faces the same financial constraints as his predecessor did. According to press reports, Merz has begun discussions with the SPD to push through an additional €200bn special fund before the new parliament (in which the AfD and *Die Linke* have a blocking minority) begins work on March 24, again circumventing the *Schuldenbremse* instead of seeking to abolish it.[120] This new fund (assuming it is established) is also just a temporary fix and will run out at some point. Permanently funding the truly Herculean task of fixing *Bundeswehr* leaves either cuts to other government programmes, or increasing taxes, neither of which is particularly popular. Given that a strong Poland stands between Germany and Russia, also under a Chancellor Merz Germany is likely to fall significantly short of Scholz's promises.

[120] To circumvent the *Schuldenbremse* (Germany's version of the debt break) via a special fund would require a 2/3 majority in the Bundestag. See "Merz will offenbar 200 Milliarden Euro für Aufrüstung," *FAZ.de*, February 25, 2025, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/bundeswehr-merz-will-offenbar-200-milliarden-euro-fuer-aufruestung-110319262.html.