



Metis

Study

Zeitenwende:

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and its implications

No. 31 | November 2022

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Summary

This study analyses some of the implications of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. To this end, it interprets the idea of the

Zeitenwende as a turning point in terms of defence, arms control and mentality before outlining recommendations for action in all three areas.

What is the Zeitenwende?

“Germany should make a more substantial contribution, and it should make it earlier and more decisively if it is to be a good partner.” This is how then Federal President Joachim Gauck summed up the German foreign and security policy situation at the Munich Security Conference in 2014 – an assessment reiterated by then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and then Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen. Dubbed the “Munich consensus” by German media, this commitment was oft-repeated in the context of debates on foreign and security policy but did not lastingly shape public awareness or political practice.

For Germany, one consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that the need to act on this increased commitment is more pressing than ever – a need that found its expression in the idea of the *Zeitenwende*, a watershed moment or turning point, as proclaimed by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz in his speech to the Bundestag on 27 February 2022. Although this turning point includes the establishment of a special fund of 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr, it actually goes far beyond this financial instrument and the aspect of force modernisation.

At the Bundeswehr Conference in September 2022, Chancellor Scholz suggested further implications of the *Zeitenwende* and stressed the need to leave behind old certainties and to rethink existing strategies in its wake. This does not really clarify further, however, what *Zeitenwende* is about. That is where this study comes in.

Turning point in defence

Putin’s war of aggression has shattered the European security and peace architecture as we know it. National and collective defence, rather than stabilisation operations

abroad, is thus once more the Bundeswehr’s primary mission – this time with a sense of urgency that nobody thought likely and few thought possible. We cannot be sure at this stage what the post-war order will look like. What is certain, however, is that, for the time being, security in Europe will have to be ensured not with but against Russia. This includes all means of diplomacy, though now applied from a position of military strength and newfound energy independence. And so the objectives, i.e. peace and security, will remain the same, but the means used to achieve them will be adapted to the new circumstances we have found ourselves in since 24 February 2022.

From a Russian perspective, Putin’s war of aggression was a strategic error of historic proportions. Instead of experiencing brain death, NATO remains alive and kicking; it is effective and it is strengthened by the expected accession of Finland and Sweden. The EU, which Putin has never accepted and which Ukraine primarily seeks to strengthen ties with, has also demonstrated unity and determination, for example when it comes to sanctions.

There is potential for conflict in the transatlantic relationship, of course, such as the dispute over investments and protectionism in the area of green technologies. But all in all, despite Russia’s disinformation campaigns, the war of aggression has led to more coherence on the “Western” side. NATO and the EU are reinvigorated and weathering this crisis.

Russia’s conventional armed forces, on the other hand, are severely decimated, and the country’s status as a (supposed) major power has been globally damaged. Whether mobilisation can appreciably restore the power of the Russian land forces remains to be seen in 2023. There are also other areas – cyberspace, the information



environment and outer space – in which Russia remains a so-called *spoiler state*. It is therefore unlikely that the threat posed by Russia will significantly decrease anytime soon, with or without Vladimir Putin as president.

Against this background, NATO remains the linchpin of Germany's defence strategy. Its new Strategic Concept describes the prevailing threats and challenges. The focus in future will be on deterrence and defence. For Germany, its tasks on NATO's eastern flank and its role as a logistic hub are particularly important. The EU's Strategic Compass complements NATO efforts, with particular emphasis on international crisis management. At both NATO and EU level, resilience is becoming increasingly relevant,¹ not least due to the increase in hybrid threats.²

Although national and collective defence is back in focus, it would be a mistake to want to shape Europe's future security with a "Cold War 2.0" in mind. The United States has increased its military presence in Europe in response to the Russian war of aggression but will likely continue to pursue its pivot to Asia in the medium and long term. China will thus increasingly focus the attention of the US in the Indo-Pacific, Putin's kleptocracy is not the Soviet Union, and the systemic rivalry between autocracy and democracy is not the East-West conflict. What is more, new domains, such as cyberspace and the information environment, and the climate crisis overarch and further complicate the conflict constellation.

Ukraine has again reminded the countries of the EU that it cannot guarantee its own security without support from the US. From a German and a European point of view, this turning point in defence thus means that we must "Trump-proof" our own defence capability. NATO's European pillar needs to be strengthened so as to make Europe more strategically self-reliant.

Turning point in defence – recommendations for action

- *Procurement and use:* All options for cooperating with industry to test solutions in advance and outside of official procurement processes should be explored in order to speed up innovation and procurement cycles. To also take some of the pressure off the Federal Office of Bundeswehr Equipment, Information Technology and In-Service Support, it is important to consider whether in-service support (i.e. maintenance, repair etc.) could once more be surrendered back to the individual services and organised in a decentralised manner.
- *EU procurement:* The different budget timelines of the EU member states make planning difficult and impede long-term armaments cooperation. To harmonise

procurement, an instrument could be created at EU level – as a successor to the European defence industry reinforcement through common procurement act (EDIRPA), for example – in which part of every national defence budget is earmarked for joint European armaments projects and long-term planning.

- *Cooperation:* The expected accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO will radically change the security situation in the Baltic Sea. Finland and Sweden will strengthen the Alliance, yet NATO's area of responsibility will expand considerably. A regional format for defence cooperation already exists with the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO).³ Capability integration partnerships based on such existing structures would contribute to the integration of the Alliance. Through the Baltic Commanders Conference initiated in 2015 and the intensified activities of the German Navy in the Baltic Sea, Germany has already launched an appropriate initiative within the framework of NATO. As regards Sweden and Finland specifically, their existing bilateral cooperation formats, such as the Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG) and the Swedish-Finnish Amphibious Task Unit (SFATU), could also be expanded to establish future NATO regional capability structures in the Baltic Sea region.

Turning point in arms control

All forms of arms control involving Russia were already in a precarious state before 24 February 2022.⁴ The invasion of Ukraine has seen confidence in Russia plummet to record lows.

The consequence of this dramatically changed situation is that the relationship between deterrence and defence on the one hand and arms control on the other will, at least for a while, have to be reconfigured in a way that is unfamiliar to many Germans. The pressure to ensure deterrence has grown, while the sphere of influence when it comes to arms control has shrunk. Both remain two sides of the same coin, however. They create security through their dialectical interaction. Arms control, however, has proven to be at its most effective when trust in its ability to function is justified. Armaments can then be controlled on a mutual and cooperative basis. Now, however, doubts reign, and cooperation has been replaced by confrontation.

In the near future, only confidence-building and risk-reducing measures, hopefully in conjunction with deterrence and defence capability, will thus be able to achieve a threat-reducing effect as part of a restructured

¹ See "Resilience", Metis Study No. 21 (November 2020).

² See "New hybrid threats", Metis Study No. 26 (July 2021).

³ See "The future of NATO's northern flank", Metis Study No. 24 (March 2021).

⁴ See "Nuclear arms control in crisis", Metis Study No. 18 (August 2020).



European security architecture. The nuclear risk in Europe alone, which increased in the wake of the termination of the INF Treaty⁵ in 2019 and which, thanks to Putin's nuclear sabre-rattling, the general public is now widely aware of once more, is enough to justify efforts to this effect. The alternatives, i.e. instability and renewed arms races, certainly hold no appeal.

However, it will take years, decades even, to rebuild the trust in arms control that has been destroyed by Putin's war of aggression. As long as the war against Ukraine is ongoing and Vladimir Putin remains in the Kremlin, first steps will be difficult and unacceptable to many – but they must remain an option, even under President Putin and even in times of war. Firstly, the war could go on for many more months, if not years, and secondly, it is anything but certain that Putin's successor in the Russian presidential office will improve our relations with Russia. A prudent and provident policy is thus one that keeps all options open. Arms control is not something to be abandoned when it becomes difficult but is an indispensable element of *Realpolitik* – a lesson that Russia too will hopefully remember.

And so arms control remains relevant even though – or precisely because – security in Europe no longer needs to be organised in cooperation with but as a form of defence against Russia. In the wake of the *Zeitenwende* and its implications for arms control, however, we must be prepared for the unfortunate reality that – following the arms control winter of recent years – Europe is not destined for an arms control spring as hoped. On the contrary, we seem to be heading towards an arms control ice age.

Turning point in arms control – recommendations for action

- *Strategy*: In future, Europe will need to be more capable of self-defence if it is to resume arms control in cooperation with Russia. Germany must thus rebalance defence and deterrence against arms control needs. The National Security Strategy would be the appropriate document for this purpose.
- *Nuclear risk*: At present, strategic stability has priority in Europe. In the short term, all possible avenues must be explored when it comes to working with Russia towards minimising risk. In the medium term, Russian short- and medium-range nuclear weapon carriers that pose a threat to Europe are a priority for armaments control policy.
- *Multilateralism*: Wherever possible, Germany should pursue arms control within the framework of the United

Nations (UN). At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that discussions in some UN forums have stalled. For this reason, Germany can and should keep its options open and not rule out alternative platforms for discussion, even if they are outside the UN framework. Progress in these areas could potentially even jumpstart some processes, e.g. in the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

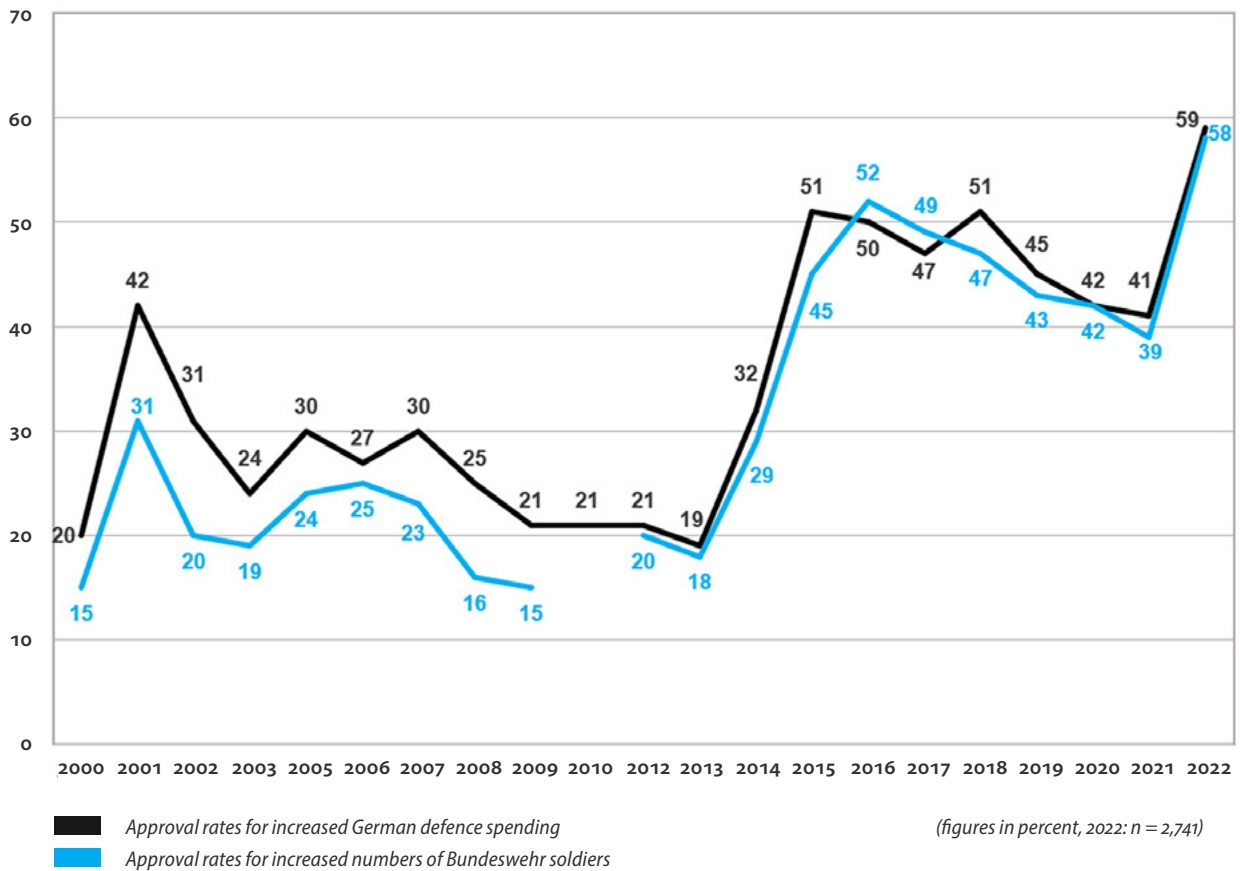
Turning point in mentality

In the era of the *Zeitenwende*, Germany's threat perception has changed. Until 24 February 2022, most Germans were in the historically fortunate situation of never having experienced military force directly or up close. Even Germany's involvement in Afghanistan did not have much of an impact on the general public's awareness of such matters. The (German) experience of being able to take peace in Europe for granted, combined with a high degree of prosperity, gave rise to certain firmly held convictions, including the primacy of the economy as well as the belief that military force is only used in asymmetrical scenarios, if at all. Global governance as a dominant perspective on world order is another one of these established narratives. The idea that the international system was primarily rules-based, or could at least be shaped that way in Europe's image, was considered just as self-evident as the assumption that often went hand in hand with it, namely that, thanks to our economic influence, we ourselves, of course, would always have the upper hand when it came to establishing and enforcing global rules.

Much more forcefully than the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s ever could, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the weaponisation of energy against Europe now confront these paradigms with the return of the possibility of international war with direct repercussions for Germany. At the deeper core of the *Zeitenwende* as a turning point in mentality is the re-emergence of the idea of having to – and having to be able to – defend Alliance partners and even our own territory with military force. This re-emergence is reflected in opinion polls.

The greatest challenge associated with the *Zeitenwende* is that of translating this changed mindset, which is relevant to every one of the issues discussed thus far, into modern, future-proof structures and routines while preventing a backslide into the all too convenient mentality of the past. As Jana Puglierin of the European Council on Foreign Relations aptly put it, Germany and the Bundeswehr “should aim for more than just a return to the status quo ante but with more money.” More of the same is not an option for ministerial bureaucrats either. Diffused responsibilities and never-ending feedback loops in the Bundeswehr and at the Federal Ministry of Defence need to be replaced with leaner structures and faster processes

⁵ The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) between the US and the Soviet Union (and Russia as its successor state) resulted in the destruction of all ground-launched intermediate and shorter-range missiles along with their nuclear warheads.



Note: The response rates for the separate options “considerably increased” and “somewhat increased” were combined for this graph. The 2004 and 2011 surveys did not include the question about defence spending. The 2004, 2010 and 2011 surveys did not include the question about the number of soldiers.

Fig. 1 Approval over time for increased defence spending and numbers of Bundeswehr soldiers | © ZMSBw 2022; Source: ZMSBw.⁶

Turning point in mentality – recommendations for action

- **Mindset:** The disappointing outcomes of previous Bundeswehr operations abroad should not lead to the turning point in mentality and defence – together understood as a new national and collective defence mindset – being seen as a regressive step back into the past. The idea of a “Cold War 2.0” is a trap and so is the tendency to misremember the first Cold War as supposedly stable when it was in fact highly risky. In Afghanistan, the US was forced to relearn some of the painful lessons of the Vietnam War, insights which culminated in General David Petraeus’ 2006 counterinsurgency manual. The Bundeswehr would do well to learn from this to spare itself a similar process of forgetting and remembering by preserving structures

and an institutional memory. Because the truth is that the next stabilisation mission will come, and international crisis management, although currently not a priority, will remain a responsibility.⁷ It is important to preserve the hard-won knowledge and experience in this area. Focusing on nothing but national and collective defence will inevitably lead to nasty surprises further down the line.

- **Debureaucratisation:** Excessive bureaucratisation of the Bundeswehr is more a matter of mindset than a consequence of overregulation. However, neither the faster, leaner and more agile processes promised in the wake of the Zeitenwende nor changed mindset will simply materialise nor can they be enforced by decree. Political leadership and leading by example is needed

⁶ <https://zms.bundeswehr.de/de/zeitenwende-im-verteidigungspolitischen-meinungsbild-5497508>

⁷ See “New challenges for UN peacekeeping”, Metis Study No. 27 (May 2022).

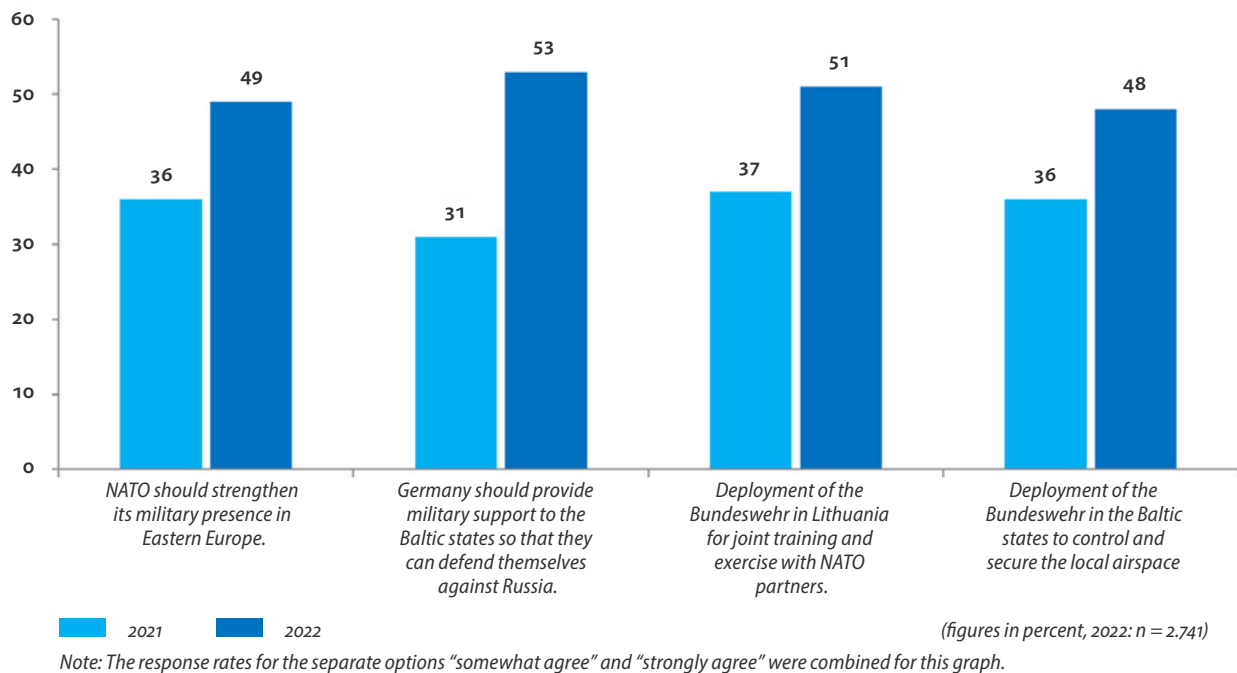


Fig. 2 Approval rates for protection of NATO's Eastern Flank | © ZMSBw 2022; Source: ZMSBw. ⁶

to deliberately jumpstart the necessary transformation process before then firmly incorporating it into all parts of the organisation through change management. It is not only a matter of changing incentive structures for those who work within the organisation but also of all levels of leadership demonstrating a modern workplace culture. Sooner or later, the dominant mindset in the workplace will also change as a result, which will radiate both internally and externally. Specific suggestions for structures and processes include: (1) Establishing an error culture: Avoiding errors at all cost must no longer be the primary objective of processes. To this end, it is necessary to place more emphasis on responsibility being delegated and assumed and to implement the principle of clear allocation and documentation of tasks, competences and responsibilities. Errors need to be identified and analysed so that the organisation as such can learn. They should not be career-ending. All levels of leadership must model an open and transparent approach to handling errors. (2) Streamline structures: Structures in the Ministry of Defence are more hierarchical than in other ministries and create bottlenecks. More tasks to be performed and approved will create more pressure,

which will slow down each task on its way through the system. Submission channels will be slowed down and ideas will be "consensualised" beyond recognition and stripped of any actual content. This limits transparency and deprives political leadership of the opportunity to purposefully position itself in light of a broad spectrum of decisions to be made. (3) Reinstatement of the Policy Planning Staff: The Ministry's political leadership lacks a "lens" to focus and evaluate topics. With a Policy Planning Staff, priorities of strategic policy could be better established and coordinated. (4) Reduce horizontal redundancies: There are currently redundancies across directorates and branches because multiple groups are all working on the same or closely related issues. A review should determine whether identifying thematic priorities to focus on across organisational boundaries would be a more efficient alternative. (5) Project more confidence: The Bundeswehr as a whole must become more vocal and more determined in communicating its own needs and perspectives in Germany's national conversation. Conversely, this also means it must be able to accept rather than deflect constructive criticism.

IMPRINT**Publisher**

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Image credits

Cover photo: Christian Lue on Unsplash

Original title

*Zeitenwende:
Der russische Angriffskrieg auf die Ukraine
und seine Implikationen*

Translation

Federal Office of Languages

ISSN-2627-0609

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