

### **III. A LIMITED BREAKTHROUGH. THE ZEITENWENDE IN GERMANY'S FOREIGN POLICY**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the catalyst for change in Germany's foreign policy. However, the assessment of the mistakes Berlin had made in its actions towards Russia, as well as Central and Eastern Europe, and their partial rectification were just one element of the revision process. The fact that the war in Ukraine has had global consequences also prompted the German government to reflect on its own strategy in other areas of key importance for the country's security and economic interests. In the context of Berlin's assertion regarding the evolution of the global international order towards multipolarity, it became clear that Germany's relations with China and the US also needed revision, as did the future of the EU.

The present state of the German debate and the steps taken by the German government thus far do not indicate any radical change in Berlin's course. In fact, what we are witnessing is a struggle to maintain the *status quo*, as well as efforts to adapt the current rules of German foreign policy to the new circumstances and to apply them so that the initiatives Berlin is promoting can materialise. This is evidenced by Germany resorting to old political concepts, attempting to strengthen its alliance with the United States and making efforts to maintain its status as Washington's most important partner in Europe, and seeking to accelerate the process of reforming EU institutions.

#### **Foreign policy revision: more than Russia**

The feeling of instability and mounting risk to Germany's security, economic and energy interests which resulted from the Russian invasion of Ukraine forced Olaf Scholz's government to adapt its foreign and security policy to the new circumstances. The Chancellor's speech at the Bundestag on 27 February 2022 marked the symbolic beginning of this process. In his speech, he outlined five specific tasks for his government:

- to offer support to Kyiv (including arms supplies),
- to persuade the Russian authorities to cease hostilities (for example by imposing sanctions on Russia),
- to prevent the conflict from spilling over into other European countries,
- to boost military security (by means including setting up a special-purpose fund worth €100 billion for the needs of the Bundeswehr) and energy security

by eliminating Germany's dependence on Russian fuel imports and expanding the country's renewable energy potential, and

- to maintain diplomatic channels in Germany's relations with Russia "without being naive".<sup>1</sup>

Scholz referred to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as the beginning of the 'turning point' (*Zeitenwende*), and the tasks he outlined are directly linked with Germany's Eastern policy (*Ostpolitik*). Therefore, it was the revision of this policy area that was viewed as a guarantee of the *Zeitenwende's* success in Germany's foreign policy. However, the war has urged the German government, in particular the Chancellor<sup>2</sup> and the ruling SPD party,<sup>3</sup> to reflect on the situation in a more comprehensive manner. Firstly, this reflection referred to the decline of multilateralism<sup>4</sup> as understood as a method for pursuing political goals using diplomatic instruments, in particular cooperation within international organisations. This manner of cooperation was expected to guarantee stability and to protect smaller countries against those states which had much greater economic and military potential.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the German authorities have realised that now it is no longer just the US and China that want to shape the global order, as an increasing number of actors now have such ambitions. This fact has obliged Berlin to conclude that an era of a multipolar international order has arrived, an era which is characterised by the dominance of several centres of power competing for global and regional influence. This in turn may lead to these states challenging the existing rules and agreements which they view as obstacles to their pursuit of their own goals. Alongside this, multipolarity is viewed as a type of international order which is much more crisis-prone and unfavourable for the smaller states, which are now exposed to their neighbours' territorial and other ambitions.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022, Bundesregierung, 27 February 2022, bundesregierung.de.

<sup>2</sup> O. Scholz, 'The Global *Zeitenwende*. How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era', Foreign Affairs, 5 December 2022, forenaffairs.com.

<sup>3</sup> Sozialdemokratische Antworten auf eine Welt im Umbruch, SPD Kommission Internationale Politik, 20 January 2023, p. 17, spd.de.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> 'Multilateralismus: Gemeinsam globale Probleme lösen', Auswärtiges Amt, 22 April 2021, auswaertigesamt.de; H.W. Maull, 'Multilateralismus. Varianten, Möglichkeiten, Grenzen, Erfolgsbedingungen', SWP-Aktuell, no. 11, February 2020, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, swp-berlin.org.

<sup>6</sup> M. Kennert, 'Die Mär von der multipolaren Weltordnung. Hegemonie in der Sicherheitspolitik des 21. Jahrhunderts', Arbeitspapier Sicherheitspolitik, no. 5/2015, Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, baks.bund.de.

Faced with such a shift in the global order, Europe's military weaknesses and certain deficiencies affecting the Bundeswehr, Berlin will seek to strengthen its alliance with the United States as the guarantor of European security. The failure of *Ostpolitik* has also prompted the development of a new model of relations with China, as the present one resembles the model Germany practiced until recently in its relations with Russia. The increasing rivalry between global and regional powers is another incentive for Germany to support institutional reforms in the EU, so that the bloc will be capable of defending European interests and operating efficiently in an enlarged format. Finally, the war has forced Berlin to finally reflect on its own place and role in an increasingly complex world.

### ***Ostpolitik*: breakthrough vs. adaptation**

The fulcrum of the *Zeitenwende* in Germany's foreign policy is its Eastern policy. This is due to the consequences of Germany's former, failed policy towards Russia for its military, economic and energy security, as well as the importance of Germany's relations with its key allies in the EU and NATO. To understand contemporary *Ostpolitik*, it is necessary to realise that the main purpose of its initial version was to unite the state.<sup>7</sup> Back in 1990, the German political elite viewed the achievement of this goal as proof of the fact that efficient diplomacy, the ability to maintain dialogue despite major differences, the intention to resolve disputes in formats for international cooperation and the ambition to build mutual trust were ingredients of a recipe for 'dealing' with difficult partners, including the USSR and later Russia.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, the principle of 'change through rapprochement' gave way to 'rapprochement through [trading] links'. This involved boosting economic and social cooperation, which was intended to serve as a transmission belt to enable Russia to adopt Western political and economic standards.<sup>9</sup> This modified approach was convergent with the new goals of German policy towards Russia, which were endorsed by the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats.

<sup>7</sup> The political transformation of the Eastern bloc and the efforts to assist the local opposition movements were not among the priorities of *Ostpolitik* as pursued by Bonn. For example, the West German government was very reluctant to support the Polish Solidarity trade union, as it feared that its activity could destabilise the relationship between the two blocs. See S. Meister, W. Jilge, 'After *Ostpolitik*. A New Russia and Eastern Europe Policy Based on Lessons from the Past', German Council on Foreign Relations, 6 December 2022, [dgap.org](https://www.dgap.org); H.A. Winkler, 'Als die SPD konservativ wurde', *Der Spiegel*, 12 June 2022, [spiegel.de](https://www.spiegel.de).

<sup>8</sup> H. Kundnani, 'Die *Ostpolitik*-Illusion', *Internationale Politik*, 18 December 2013, [internationalepolitik.de](https://www.internationalepolitik.de).

<sup>9</sup> A. Kwiatkowska, *Germany on Russia. Yes to links, no to rapprochement*, OSW, Warsaw 2014, [osw.waw.pl](https://www.osw.waw.pl).

The underlying intention was to avoid ‘provoking’ the Kremlin in security-related issues while involving it as much as possible in cooperation in this field. Another aim was to develop economic cooperation, in particular regarding the import of energy carriers; this manifested itself in the construction of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines.

Berlin became aware of the problem in its relations with Moscow when Vladimir Putin began to put his imperialist policy into practice: the war in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea and the launch of the conflict in the Donbas in 2014 made dialogue with Russia increasingly difficult. However, the Kremlin’s aggressive stance did not change the German conviction that “European security can only be built with Russia”<sup>10</sup> and did not stop the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Nevertheless, intensive economic cooperation did not lead to the democratisation of Russian society. Instead, giving it priority enabled Moscow to set up a network of interpersonal ties in Germany’s business and political groups, which to some degree influenced the German *Ostpolitik*.<sup>11</sup> Prioritising Germany’s relations with Russia also became a permanent element of Berlin’s approach to Central and Eastern Europe. From Berlin’s point of view, initiatives intended to integrate mainly Ukraine & Georgia with NATO and the EU equated to the crossing of a ‘red line’ in its relations with Moscow. It was due to Germany’s stance on this issue and its support for the construction of Nord Stream 1 and 2 – despite the concerns voiced by other states in the region – that its policy towards Central and Eastern Europe receded into the background.<sup>12</sup>

The domestic political debates held in Germany after 24 February 2022 indicate that the state’s mainstream political forces have recognised the need to revise its *Ostpolitik*. This will form the basis for its long-term evolution beyond the term of the present government. However, as yet no specific proposals for this change have been presented, and the debate is mainly focused on questions of arms supplies to Ukraine, Ukraine’s reconstruction, and its possible future membership of NATO and the EU. Intensive work on developing a new concept for Germany’s Eastern policy is underway in the SPD. This is the result of two very important factors. Firstly, the previous concept was devised by Chancellor Willy Brandt’s cabinet (and Brandt is highly respected by the Social Democrats).

<sup>10</sup> See the SPD’s platform document *Aus Respekt vor deiner Zukunft. Das Zukunftsprogramm der SPD*, 2021, p. 59, spd.de.

<sup>11</sup> See S. Meister, W. Jilge, ‘After Ostpolitik...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> See for example M. Roth, ‘Op-Ed: A New Ostpolitik for the “Watershed Moment”’, *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 15 July 2022, ip-quarterly.com.

This makes the party uniquely responsible for revising this model. Secondly, the other parties raise this topic less frequently because they wish to avoid the consequences of potential mistakes and distortions during the next stages of *Ostpolitik*. This is particularly evident in the activity of the CDU/CSU, as this party continued the course set by their opponents, and has failed to revise the Eastern policy practiced during Angela Merkel's 16-year rule, despite the numerous actions the Kremlin took in that period which jeopardised Europe's security. Similarly, the FDP has preferred to remain uninvolved in these issues; as the coalition partner of both the SPD and the CDU/CSU, it acted more as an executor of the Chancellery's intentions. The Greens have manifested a similar attitude, although they presented themselves as the main proponents of a tougher course towards Moscow well before 24 February 2022. Similarly, one should not expect the AfD and the Left Party to come up with any more profound reflections on this issue: the former party because of its deeply rooted pro-Russian sentiment, which was not even undermined by the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and the latter because of its ongoing internal conflicts, which may soon lead to the formal division of the party.

Despite only moderate progress in work on the new concept, the current state of the debate makes it possible to distinguish several features that will determine its final shape. Firstly, in statements by Germany's leading politicians, and in the national security strategy published in June 2023, Russia's behaviour is referred to as the most serious threat to transatlantic security.<sup>13</sup> This is why the sanctions imposed on this country should be maintained, and why the European security architecture should be built in opposition to Russia.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, certain statements contained in documents published by the SPD's leadership and the party's group in the Bundestag indicate that Berlin views the war as just another stage in its relations with Moscow, and expects to resume cooperation once the war is over. This is corroborated by the fact that these documents emphasise Russia's role as a "country characterised by significant areal, population and military potential, which makes it an important actor in shaping Europe's security architecture in the long term".<sup>15</sup> For this scenario to materialise, Russia needs to meet two conditions: to carry out a political transition and to abandon its imperialist course. Alongside this, Germany highlights the need to maintain communication with the Kremlin.

<sup>13</sup> *Wehrhaft. Resilient. Nachhaltig. Integrierte Sicherheit für Deutschland. Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie*, Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 14 June 2023, p. 22, bmvg.de.

<sup>14</sup> *Sozialdemokratische Antworten...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> 'Sozialdemokratische internationale Politik in der Zeitenwende', Positionspapier der SPD-Bundestagsfraktion, 13 January 2023, p. 8, spdfraktion.de.

According to SPD members in the Bundestag and Bundesrat, one method for restoring confidence in Russia involves creating this confidence in selected areas (the so-called ‘islands of cooperation’) and pursuing a policy of small steps.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, in the opinion of the German coalition government it is Vladimir Putin and his aides who are responsible for the invasion of Ukraine, while Russian society has fallen victim to the regime; this approach may facilitate the normalisation of Berlin’s relations with Moscow following the end of the armed conflict.

This vision of the future post-war *Ostpolitik* does not envisage a radical change in Germany’s attitude towards Central Europe. Although the recent debates have drawn more attention to the region, so far no initiatives have been proposed which could indicate a new attitude towards it. Germany’s priorities remain unchanged: these include cooperation in the field of security and consultation of security issues with the region’s states, moves which are intended to restore the confidence in Germany which was ruined due to the mistakes of the previous *Ostpolitik*. Moreover, Germany wants the Central European EU member states to be its partners in devising a new Eastern policy for the EU as a whole. Although numerous German politicians have called for shifting the *Ostpolitik*’s centre of gravity from Russia to the states of Central Europe, the developments of recent months suggest that Germany is still failing to treat these countries as equal partners. Key decisions regarding the war and potential peace talks are being taken in cooperation with the US, France and the UK, and Paris continues to be Berlin’s most important partner as regards new EU-wide initiatives, and Germany continues to perceive itself as the intermediary between the Western and Eastern members of NATO and the EU. However, it cannot be ruled out that in the future Berlin will differentiate its approach towards specific Central European states depending on what stance they adopt towards institutional reforms in the EU. If this is the case, it is likely that those in favour of extending the majority voting system in the Council of the EU to include common foreign policy issues would receive more comprehensive offers of cooperation, including in issues beyond the field of security.

Germany’s ideas regarding the Eastern European states are even vaguer than those relating to the central part of the continent. Despite this, it seems that three main factors will determine Berlin’s cooperation with that region:

- the NATO and EU membership aspirations cherished by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia,

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

- moves to diversify energy resources, and
- the support for and promotion of democratic values and assistance in efforts to build civil society.

Ukraine has a special place in Germany's new *Ostpolitik*, as a country which Germany could use as a platform to restore its reputation. This is why Berlin is determined to offer multifaceted support to Kyiv, while at the same time emphasising its role as an essential donor and partner which can provide Ukraine with stable and long-lasting assistance in all aspects.<sup>17</sup> However, it should be noted that due to the ongoing hostilities, the main emphasis at present is being placed on military assistance. Despite this, the magnitude of support offered by Germany and Berlin's participation in preparations to reconstruct Ukraine may suggest that Germany is seeking a long-term, profound involvement in this country. This is evidenced by the fact that Germany has declared its willingness to coordinate the reconstruction process. Berlin continues to support Kyiv's pro-European ambitions, although it has made them conditional on institutional reforms within the EU. These in turn are likely to take some time due to the controversy this issue has raised in specific member states. An even greater degree of caution is evident as regards Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations. The German stance on this issue was reflected in the declaration adopted at the NATO summit in Vilnius. The document says that in order to become a member of the Alliance, Kyiv needs to obtain the consent of all the allies and meet certain conditions.<sup>18</sup>

## The US and China: recalibrating cooperation

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is one element of the German government's more general reflection on the shift of the international order towards multipolarity, which poses a challenge to the previous doctrine of multilateralism, which to date has been one of the foundations of Germany's foreign policy. This systemic framework, combined with an efficient use of diplomatic instruments and economic potential, has enabled Germany to become one of the world's leading economies and decisionmakers in security and development issues, despite not having similar military capabilities to those of the UN Security Council members. Faced with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany still

<sup>17</sup> See L. Gibadło, K. Niecypor, J. Tarociński, 'Appreciating and mobilising Germany. Zelensky in Berlin', OSW, 16 May 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>18</sup> J. Gotkowska, J. Graca *et al*, 'NATO summit in Vilnius: breakthroughs and unfulfilled hopes', OSW Commentary, no. 526, 13 July 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

intends to boost multilateralism (for example by reforming institutions such as the UN) while at the same time still being ready to adapt its foreign policy to the realities of a multipolar world order. This approach is not new, as it fits in with the concepts highlighting the growing influence of new regional powers (*Gestaltungsmächte*) on the international situation, which were already present in internal debates and strategic documents in the previous decade.<sup>19</sup> To some degree, adopting this approach represents an attempt to escape from the trap of maintaining balance in relations with the US, which is the guarantor of Germany's security, and with China, which is its biggest trading partner. It enables Berlin to avoid the narratives emphasising the bipolarity of the international order, which would force it to abandon its previous strategy of balancing between Beijing and Washington.<sup>20</sup> However, the desire to maintain the *status quo* does not change the fact that after 24 February 2022 Germany did indeed revise its approach towards these two countries.

The analysis of the mistakes and omissions of *Ostpolitik* has fuelled the debate on the need to revise Germany's policy towards China, which in many ways is similar to that which it had historically pursued towards Russia, and which is linked with the same, or even greater, level of risk. Since diplomatic relations between Germany and China were established, their main purpose has been to develop trade and economic cooperation. This has resulted in Berlin becoming dangerously dependent on a state which is balancing between an authoritarian system and a dictatorship, and whose revisionism poses a threat to international stability.<sup>21</sup>

Concerns about what form Berlin's economic cooperation with Beijing would take were exacerbated by the fact that over recent years Chinese companies have boosted their efforts to compete with German ones and increased their investment activity in Germany. China's policy – which posed a direct risk to state security (including the activity of Chinese secret services, economic espionage and the application of dual-use technology in the arms industry) – has complicated bilateral relations and contradicted Beijing's declared intention to treat Berlin as a true partner. One constant element of the German debate

<sup>19</sup> See for example G. Hellmann, 'Zwischen Gestaltungsmacht und Hegemoniefalle. Zur neuesten Debatte über eine "neue deutsche Außenpolitik"' [in:] *Aus Politik Und Zeitgeschichte. Deutsche Außenpolitik*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 11 July 2016, bpb.de; A. Kwiatkowska, 'Mocarstwo pragmatyczne', *Teologia Polityczna*, 4 October 2012, teologiapolityczna.pl.

<sup>20</sup> L. Gibadło, J. Gotkowska, 'Germany's first national security strategy: the minimal consensus', *OSW Commentary*, no. 519, 26 June 2023, osw.waw.pl.

<sup>21</sup> See L. Gibadło, 'A dangerous resemblance. Moves to revise Germany's China policy', *OSW Commentary*, no. 473, 19 October 2022, osw.waw.pl.



on the country's course towards China is the divergence between Germany's declared efforts to protect human rights and the minimal pressure it has put on China in these issues. Although Beijing's aggressiveness has increased, Berlin's course towards it has remained unchanged; this in turn has begun to provoke tensions in its relations with its allies. The most serious tensions emerged in the relationship with Washington, and manifested itself in the dispute over the involvement of the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE in the expansion of Germany's 5G network.

Therefore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be viewed as a projection of the possible consequences for Germany of an armed confrontation between China and the US (or one of its allies) in the Indo-Pacific region. It has also served as a catalyst for the debate on Berlin's new policy towards Beijing. From the outset of this debate, both the ruling parties and the opposition CDU/CSU have supported the need to reduce Germany's economic dependence on China. However, the subsequent course of the debate exposed certain differences in the specific parties' views regarding Germany's future approach to that country. The Greens were willing to toughen this policy in a more radical manner, both in rhetorical terms (*vide* the stronger criticism of China's violation of human rights and international law offered by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock) and in the form of the proposals devised by the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action regarding the new reporting obligations for companies which are "(too) heavily involved in China".<sup>22</sup> However, at present it seems that Berlin intends to minimise the confrontational aspect of its activities towards Beijing. There are two indications corroborating this view. The first is the position adopted by the Chancellery, which continues to be the main architect of Germany's foreign policy. From Germany's point of view, China's condemnation of the use of nuclear weapons and nuclear threats is a key argument which could deter the Kremlin from using these weapons.<sup>23</sup> Germany's national security strategy contains a brief section (two paragraphs) focused on China, and the relationship with China is still based on the current triad of partnership, competition and strategic rivalry, although the importance of the latter two elements has increased over the last few years.<sup>24</sup> The other indication (which is evident for example in the Strategy on China) involves Germany's rejection of an abrupt reduction in or severance of economic ties, and instead relies on the diversification of trade relations and the reduction of

<sup>22</sup> M. Bröcker, 'Der Bruch mit China', *The Pioneer*, 5 January 2023, [thepioneer.de](https://thepioneer.de).

<sup>23</sup> See M. Bogusz, L. Gibadło, 'Cooperation in spite of everything. Scholz's visit to China', OSW, 7 November 2022, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>24</sup> *Wehrhaft. Resilient. Nachhaltig...*, *op. cit.*

economic dependences.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, Berlin intends to gradually shift its cooperation towards including Asia, Africa and South America, as well as countries guided by democratic values (the so-called ‘friendshoring’ approach).

While the war has forced Germany to revise the course of its *Ostpolitik*, it has provoked a renaissance in Berlin’s perception of Washington as the guarantor of its security. However, since the beginning of this century it has been evident that Germany was gradually losing confidence in US policy, a trend which came to a head during Donald Trump’s presidency. At that time Berlin was shocked by the message he spread, openly criticising Germany for failing to meet its allied commitments regarding defence spending, and for pursuing its foreign policy mainly with a view to obtaining economic benefits, to the detriment of its allies, including the US. This was also when, as a result of Washington adopting a new foreign policy paradigm, Germany was seriously confronted with a shift in the international order: its decision to enter into strategic rivalry with China, Russia and the United States’ regional competitors equated to an overt rejection of the principle of maximum cooperation and seeking compromise even in relations with difficult partners which Berlin had previously endorsed.<sup>26</sup> Trump’s actions, including challenging the Allies’ commitments within NATO, provoked a debate in the EU about the need for Europe to reduce its dependence on its alliance with the US. In Germany, however, this debate focused on the economy and financial issues rather than on security.<sup>27</sup> Berlin approached the subsequent French proposals regarding Europe’s strategic autonomy with scepticism.<sup>28</sup> When Joe Biden won the US presidential election in 2020, Germany expressed the hope that this development could facilitate the improvement of its relations with Washington.

When after 24 February 2022 a direct threat emerged in the vicinity of NATO’s borders and Germany was forced into realising its own military shortcomings, the country’s decisionmakers were reinforced in their conviction that the alliance with the United States was (and remains) of crucial importance, as does the US military presence in Europe. In this new situation, Berlin has expanded its goals beyond its concern about the stability of this alliance, and has begun to focus on efforts to maintain Germany’s status as the US’s most important

<sup>25</sup> *China-Strategie der Bundesregierung*, Auswärtiges Amt, 21 July 2023, [auswaertiges-amt.de](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de).

<sup>26</sup> J. Gotkowska, ‘US-German clash over international order and security. The consequences for NATO’s Eastern flank’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 294, 22 February 2019, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>27</sup> See H. Maas, ‘Wir lassen nicht zu, dass die USA über unsere Köpfe hinweg handeln’, *Handelsblatt*, 21 August 2018, [handelsblatt.com](https://www.handelsblatt.com).

<sup>28</sup> J. Gotkowska, ‘European strategic autonomy or European pillar in NATO? Germany’s stance on French initiatives’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 320, 21 February 2020, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

ally in Europe, despite the mistakes of its *Ostpolitik* and the weakness of the Bundeswehr. This meant that Berlin started to view Washington's stance as an indispensable element of the decision-making processes regarding German involvement in providing military assistance to Kyiv. Berlin's decision to make the dispatch of Leopard tanks to Ukraine conditional on Washington delivering Abrams tanks to Kyiv was an excellent example of this approach.

This approach is also evident in Germany's declared readiness to adopt the concept of 'partnership in leadership' which US President George H.W. Bush proposed to the German government back in 1989. The modernisation of the Bundeswehr (regardless of the problems with its implementation), the decision to allocate €100 billion for this purpose in the form of a special fund, Berlin's unwavering support for the development of Europe's security potential within NATO, and its rejection of competing European initiatives are all intended to make this process of preparation increasingly credible. Moreover, Germany is also seeking to expand its alliance with the US by increasing cooperation with this country in other areas. Aside from the joint commitment to defend international law and democratic values, the other pillars of this cooperation include energy collaboration and supplies of LNG, which are expected to replace supplies of gas from Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Germany's increased activity in its relations with African, Asian and South American states is a spin-off of its recent reflections on the shift towards a multipolar world in which regional actors will play an increasingly important part. It is also an element of its rivalry with China. The intention to procure energy carriers to replace those previously imported from Russia and to seek an alternative to Germany's economic cooperation with China has urged Berlin to find new partners. This is why the Scholz government has consistently emphasised the importance of countries from outside the transatlantic area. Berlin's intention to revive cooperation with these countries is corroborated by the fact that Germany has listed collaboration with Asian, African and South American states among the priority goals of its foreign policy, as discussed in platform documents and speeches delivered by German decision makers. Other facts supporting this view include Berlin's efforts to devise special strategies targeted at specific regions, and its attempts to come to terms with its own post-colonial past.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See M. Kędziński, 'At all costs. Germany shifts to LNG', *OSW Commentary*, no. 510, 28 April 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>30</sup> See L. Gibadło, 'Kierownictwo SPD o polityce zagranicznej: przywództwo RFN w multipolarnym świecie', *OSW*, 14 February 2023, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

The narrative Berlin has adopted also serves to lend credibility to the image of Germany as a member of the West, and as an actor which does not intend to impose its political and economic perspective on these countries. Germany has emphasised its conviction that the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine is not a priority threat for countries such as India and Brazil, as their most important challenges include the fight against climate change and the eradication of poverty.

## **The EU: through reforms to global leadership**

The war has become an argument which Berlin is using to push through a quick reform of the EU, which is one of the goals of the SPD-Greens-FDP coalition.<sup>31</sup> From Germany's point of view, the EU needs to strengthen its position so it can face global rivalry and establish new partnerships.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the EU enlargement plan to include the Western Balkan states, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova (which Berlin supports) will require institutional efforts to streamline the organisation's operation, if it is to have more than 30 member states in the future. Germany views this reform, which is the most important for the EU's external and internal policy, as a prerequisite for the admission of further countries to the bloc. For Germany, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was an impetus to implement the changes which the Merkel government had endorsed in previous years and has been strongly emphasised in the SPD-Greens-FDP coalition agreement, on which basis a government was formed whose long-term goal is the federalisation of the EU.

Germany has repeatedly emphasised its special responsibility for the future of the EU, which derives from its status as the bloc's largest economy, and as a nation which aspires to be the European security leader. It has therefore assumed the leading role in the process of implementing the reforms. Recent months have brought certain dominant features of this process to light. Firstly, France continues to be Germany's most important European partner, and it is in cooperation with France that Berlin will devise the most important initiatives regarding the EU's future. One example of this is the decision to include the EU reforms among the most important topics of consultation between the heads of government, ministers and parliamentarians of the two states, and by

<sup>31</sup> *Mehr Fortschritt Wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit*, Koalitionsvertrag 2021-2025, spd.de.

<sup>32</sup> Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz im Rahmen der Diskussionsreihe "This is Europe" im Europäischen Parlament am 9. Mai 2023 in Straßburg, Bundesregierung, 9 May 2023, bundesregierung.de.

the move to establish a bilateral group of experts to prepare recommendations relating to the EU's institutional reforms.

Secondly, one of Germany's most important intentions is to extend the qualified majority voting (QMV) system in the Council of the EU to the common foreign and security policy (CFSP). To justify this plan, Berlin has cited the likely problems with reaching compromise in an EU composed of more than 30 member states, based on instances of major decisions being blocked by the veto of a single member state. Plans have been made to gradually expand the qualified majority voting system; initially this will cover the least controversial issues, such as human rights.

Thirdly, German politicians intend to protect the rule of law and the EU's fundamental values. Unlike the Merkel governments, the SPD-Greens-FDP coalition has emphasised the importance of these issues in a much more consistent and strong manner, and has openly criticised Hungary and Poland for their conduct in this respect. As a consequence, the German government is supporting the measures launched by the European Commission and the European Parliament to carry out inspections and eliminate any 'deficits' in member states' compliance with the rule of law.

Achieving these goals is Berlin's maximum plan. However, Germany is aware that some member states, especially in Central Europe, are not enthusiastic about this concept. This is why it has launched a two-track policy in this area. On the one hand, it is strongly involved in cooperation with those countries which share the German vision of the EU's institutional reform (in particular France). On the other hand, since Chancellor Scholz's August 2022 speech in Prague, Germany has gradually reduced its goals as regards QMV: now it is mainly focused on extending the voting mechanism to foreign policy and on applying the currently valid treaty provisions, the so-called *passerelle* clauses. An article authored by the foreign ministers of Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, Romania and Slovenia can be viewed as one manifestation of this stance;<sup>33</sup> it lists mechanisms which could be applied to expand QMV without the need to modify EU treaties. These include the instruments mentioned in Article 31 of the Treaty on the EU: greater use of 'constructive abstentions', using QMV in selected common policy areas in line with Article 31 (2) of the TEU (for example, regarding decisions to set up

<sup>33</sup> A. Baerbock *et al*, 'It's time for more majority decision-making in EU foreign policy', Politico, 12 June 2023, politico.eu.

the operating conditions for civilian EU missions, and to coordinate common EU positions to be presented in international human rights forums), and the application of *passerelle* clauses.<sup>34</sup> To dispel the doubts voiced by those countries which are sceptical of the reform, work on a ‘safety net’ mechanism has been announced. This goes beyond the current possibilities for blocking the adoption of decisions concerning the CFSP which are unfavourable to the national interests of individual member states. Less frequent and smaller emphasis on the proposals to tighten the mechanisms for monitoring the rule of law is an additional ‘incentive’, targeted mainly at Poland and Hungary. In this way, Berlin may be hinting that the institutional reforms are more important than protection of fundamental values, and that it is willing to sacrifice these values if this results in the opponents of greater use of QMV modifying their stance. However, it cannot be ruled out that the German government, which remains determined to pursue its goals, will decide to create a separate cooperation format within the EU to include those member states which support increased consolidation. This move would make it possible to apply the QMV system in matters relating to the CFSP, which would equate to an EU with different degrees of integration ultimately taking shape.

## Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced Germany to revise the key areas of its foreign policy and to make what seems to be a unique pre-emptive move. The ‘reluctant hegemon’<sup>35</sup> has verbally assumed the role of Europe’s leader in an attempt to salvage its reputation, which was heavily damaged as a result of its insufficient preparedness for and response to the threats posed by China and Russia’s conduct, the mistakes of its *Ostpolitik*, and post-24 February 2022 by its reluctance to provide military assistance to Kyiv. As “the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be, a bridge builder within the European Union and an advocate for multilateral solutions to global problems”<sup>36</sup> Germany still wants to shape the post-war order in Europe and to maintain its influence on global affairs.

The reassessment which the *Zeitenwende* is currently undergoing, however, does not indicate any significant breakthrough. The vast majority of its ideas

<sup>34</sup> For more see for example J. Mintel, N. von Ondarza, ‘More EU Decisions by Qualified Majority Voting – but How?’, *SWP Comment*, no. 61, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 19 October 2022, [swp-berlin.org](https://www.swp-berlin.org).

<sup>35</sup> ‘The reluctant hegemon’, *The Economist*, 15 June 2013, [economist.com](https://www.economist.com).

<sup>36</sup> O. Scholz, ‘The Global *Zeitenwende*...’, *op. cit.*

are based on old concepts which the armed conflict in Ukraine has simply revived. Berlin wants to an even greater degree to base its foreign policy on two well-established pillars. The first is the EU institutional reform which was endorsed in German debates long before 24 February 2022; it will also help Berlin to push the debate on efforts to step up integration in the field of finance into the background, which is important because the German authorities remain sceptical about this concept. The other pillar involves Germany's relations with the US. The Russian aggression has compelled Berlin to realise that there is no alternative to Washington as an actor which could respond to any military threat affecting Germany. This is why the war in Ukraine has offered Germany an opportunity not just to renew its alliance with the US, but also to strengthen it as much as possible and consolidate its position as the US's leading partner in Europe. As a consequence, Germany is making its security policy even more dependent on cooperation with its American partners.

The *Zeitenwende's* progress in areas in which the most profound change was expected is also limited. Although work on *Ostpolitik* is far from complete, the continued application of certain elements of the previous concept is already evident. These include highlighting the difference between Russian society and the Russian ruling elite, and the need to maintain dialogue with the Kremlin. Just as in previous years, the absence of any ideas for renewing Germany's relations with Central Europe or for new initiatives aimed at Eastern Europe is also noticeable. Against this backdrop, Germany's involvement in Ukraine does seem to be a real innovation, although it too could be viewed as a tool to boost Berlin's importance in potential peace negotiations and restore its credibility among its allies. A particularly conservative approach in Germany's relations with China is also apparent. Although Berlin is likely aware that a quick shift is necessary, the network of its dependences on Beijing and the fear of the consequences should these ties be abruptly severed oblige it to remain cautious. This in turn undermines its intentions to revise its China policy. It therefore cannot be ruled out that the first tangible effects of the *Zeitenwende* will emerge in Germany's European and transatlantic policy, while a breakthrough in the form of a new *Ostpolitik* will take more time to materialise.

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