

Germany's first national security strategy: the minimal consensus

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On 14 June 2023, the German government adopted the country's first ever national security strategy entitled 'Integrated Security for Germany'. The strategy is guided by an ambitious comprehensive approach which emphasises the need to boost Germany's defence preparedness, resilience and to ensure the sustainable use of natural resources. This is also the first time when Russia has been clearly identified as a threat to Germany and its allies. The document highlights also the role of NATO and Germany's commitment to collective defence. The ruling coalition has been aware of the need to define more precisely its course in the security policy. At the same time, the strategy reflects the minimal consensus between the coalition parties in many areas. However, this strategy can only serve as a starting point for further discussions due to the lack of priorities and defined tools, inadequate funding and unresolved problems with policy coordination.

On the way to the strategy

Debates about the need to devise a cross-ministerial document to comprehensively describe Germany's security environment, threats and policy objectives have been ongoing for several years. The most recent, but narrower strategy (the White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr), was published in 2016 by the Federal Defence Ministry. The coalition agreement signed in November 2022 included an intention to develop a more detailed concept. The SPD, the Greens and the FDP pledged to come up with a strategy within a year. However, its publication was repeatedly postponed because of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which forced Berlin to revise its security policy. In addition, the changes of the defence minister certainly did not make this process any easier.

The most important reason why the strategy was finally published as late as 2023 involved the disputes over the document's content, which mainly arose between the Chancellery and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which was overseeing the entire process. One of the conflicting issues was about the location, staffing and line-up of the national security council to be established and modelled on the council which operates under the US President. If the MFA were to supervise this new council, this would increase its impact in foreign and security policy to the disadvantage of the Chancellery.



If the council were to be supervised by the Chancellor, meanwhile, this would further reduce the importance of the MFA, whose significance has already declined in recent years. The absence of a compromise resulted in abandoning the plan to establish this body. Other controversies concerned Germany's defence spending level and more federal government's power in civil preparedness, which the states were opposed to grant.

How Germany sees the world

According to the strategy, the profound changes affecting Germany's security environment are linked to the following factors: Russia, which is defined as the most significant threat in the Euro-Atlantic area; China, which is seen as a partner, competitor and systemic rival; the crises and conflicts in Europe's neighbourhood; comprehensive threats to society and the economy (including terrorism, organised crime, cyber-attacks); and the climate crisis. The strategy describes the international order as multipolar and marked by rising systemic rivalry. This view might result from Germany's reluctance to accept the definition of increasing bipolarity with growing US-China competition, in which Germany would need to explicitly support one side.

Germany, as the 'largest economy in the heart of Europe' and its most populous country, admits

” The strategy defines Russia as the biggest threat in the Euro-Atlantic area.

in the document that it bears special responsibility for ensuring peace, security, prosperity, stability and the sustainable use of natural resources. German security policy interests include protecting the people, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Germany as well as of the EU & Germany's allies, and the free democratic order. Other issues of major importance to Germany include boosting the EU's ability to act globally while deepening the cooperation with France and consolidating the transatlantic alliance in partnership with the US; efforts to promote a global order based on international law; and fostering an open rules-based international economic and financial system which has formed the basis for Germany's globalised economy safeguarding the country's prosperity and social cohesion. Issues important to the Green Party include fostering peace and stability worldwide by promoting human rights and democracy among others, and the need to protect natural resources, limiting the climate crisis and managing its impact.

Defence preparedness: NATO comes first

The first chapter of the strategy highlights the key role of NATO as the basis for ensuring Germany's security. It also emphasises the importance not only of Article 5, but also of the EU's mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union) and the German-French mutual assistance commitment (Article 4 of the Treaty of Aachen). Berlin intends to strengthen the European pillar of the transatlantic defence community so as to make European NATO members increasingly able to act on its own. NATO should be ready to respond to nuclear, conventional, cyber and space-based threats. The strategy also emphasises the importance of NATO's nuclear deterrence and Germany's participation in the nuclear sharing programme. However, the significance of these fragments is somewhat weakened by the statement that according to the federal government a nuclear war must never be fought. Berlin's ambition is for the Bundeswehr to become the cornerstone of conventional defence in Europe: Germany wants to strengthen its military presence on allied territory and to act as a partner which offers opportunities for military cooperation and integrates the capabilities of the smaller allies. The document also emphasises the role of the logistical hub that Germany has become for NATO. However, in its efforts to fulfil its ambitions Germany may encounter funding problems, as the strategy contains very vague passages regarding the allocation of 2% of GDP to defence. That should be an average over a multi-year period and will initially include €100 billion from a special

fund for the Bundeswehr. It is interesting to note that the document emphasises the importance of civil preparedness, the protection of civilians and critical infrastructure, as well as critical enterprises. This is followed by the announcement that specific measures and strategies will be developed in these areas at the national and EU levels. Another ambition, and also a challenge, will involve engaging federal and state authorities, local structures, private companies and NGOs in cooperation.

For Berlin, the European Union, viewed not only as a peace project but also as a global actor, is a consistently important element of European security architecture. The strategy pledges to strengthen the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), most importantly through measures to stabilise the EU's neighbourhood. Since Chancellor Scholz's visit to Kyiv (June 2022) and the speech on the future of Europe which he gave in Prague (August 2022), Berlin has officially supported EU enlargement process to include not only the Western Balkan states, but also Ukraine, Moldova and, at a later stage, Georgia. At the same time, it links this support with the need for internal reform of the EU, involving in particular efforts to extend the principle of qualified majority voting in the CFSP. To achieve this goal the document does not rule out treaty amendments. Berlin has also emphasised the need to implement the Strategic Compass, which the EU adopted in March 2022, and to boost the PESCO projects, the European Peace Facility, and the European defence industry (including by harmonising military capability requirements). Berlin would also welcome the more extensive deployment of EU civilian and military missions to respond to crises and conflicts and has pledged to contribute to the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (around 5000 troops) which has been established on the basis of the Strategic Compass. At the same time, it intends to prioritise the international crisis prevention and to promote political processes leading to conflict resolution. In this context, the coalition emphasises the importance of development policy as an indispensable element of long-term security policy. Furthermore, the strategy highlights Berlin's permanent dedication to preserving and developing the arms control architecture.

” **The strategy regarding the pledge to spend 2% of Germany's GDP on defence is vague.**

Safeguarding values, the German economic model, and natural resources

Two thirds of the strategy address issues which go far beyond traditional security policy. The document's second chapter is devoted to efforts to boost comprehensive resilience both at home and abroad. Germany recognises the need to protect democracy against hybrid threats, disinformation, influence campaigns, espionage and sabotage activities. The German leadership intends to defend the rules-based international order based on multilateral cooperation, among other things. In this context, Germany has again declared its readiness to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Berlin has also emphasised its commitment to promote human rights through humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and peace building. At the same time, the second chapter contains a very pragmatic appeal to increase economic and financial resilience, as well as raw materials security. Germany declares the will to reduce critical dependencies in strategically relevant sectors to avoid situations in which economic ties could have a negative impact on the German economy and security. In addition, Germany emphasises the desire to achieve technological and digital sovereignty, including by investing in new technologies and innovation. It will also seek better situational awareness in cyber and outer space. As regards cyber security, it plans to improve coordination within the federal government and other authorities and institutions and to increase coordination in repelling cyber-attacks. As regards outer space, Germany recognises its growing importance to civilian and military activity and will seek to expand its capabilities in this domain. In many of these areas the government has announced plans to draw up a number of sub-strategies.

The final chapter of the document is dedicated to sustainable development and the sustainable use of natural resources. Fighting the climate crisis is referred to as 'humanity's central task in this century'. Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, implementation of the European Green Deal, continued global decarbonisation and numerous other measures carried out at the national level are expected to help Germany to achieve these goals. From the German perspective, ensuring global food security is equally important. In this context, Berlin intends to support the reform of the common agricultural policy of the EU, to back the WTO's efforts to limit trade-distorting subsidies and to facilitate research on supporting international agricultural research. Berlin also proposes to improve the effectiveness of global pandemic prevention, including by strengthening the World Health Organisation. The fight against the consequences of climate change is important to Germany in the context of efforts to curb illegal migration from famine-prone regions and to mitigate the related crises and conflicts. Germany declares also its readiness to help to tackle such problems faced by numerous African, Asian and South American countries and thereby to strengthen its position in these regions.

Conclusions

The publication of the strategy indicates a growing awareness of the need to more precisely define Berlin's course in security policy, both for internal purposes and for international partners and allies. At the same time, the document reflects the minimal consensus between the coalition parties as regards the shift in Germany's foreign and security policy, which happened after 24 February 2022. In many areas the document fails to state specific priorities and ways of attaining the declared goals and ambitions. Insufficient funding is the most serious problem. Due to the priority given to balancing the federal budget adopted by the FDP, over the next two years all ministries will be subject to budget cuts rather than investments in boosting comprehensive security. Although the defence ministry will be exempt from these cuts, it will not receive much more additional money beyond the special modernisation fund (€100 billion), which in real terms has already shrunk due to the interest rates and inflation.

Although the strategy does emphasise the need for a broad integrated approach to security, it fails to specify how this is to be achieved, and does not go beyond declarations regarding stepped-up coordination between various actors in the areas discussed. The lack of harmonisation of German foreign, security and economic policies will result in friction, as well as incoherent and sometimes contradictory stances and actions by specific ministries, depending on the positions of individual parties or the business groups linked with them. The sometimes contradictory policies being pursued by the various ministries in the current SPD-Green-FDP coalition government serve as an example. As a consequence, the Chancellery will continue to set political guidance in the most important areas of Germany's policy, while the ministries supervised by the smaller coalition partners may potentially adopt different approaches.

This is the first time that a German strategy has clearly defined Russia as a threat to the security of Germany and its NATO & EU partners. However, the document does not provide any details as to what policy Berlin intends to pursue towards Moscow in the future. It is important to note that the strategy emphasises the role of NATO as a collective defence alliance in which Germany wishes to play a key role. However, no specific priorities have been provided in this context and the term 'NATO's eastern flank' is absent from the document. Another striking fact is that the document fails to mention other allies, aside from the US, with which Berlin intends to boost political-military cooperation. How Germany will live up to the ambitions stated in the strategy in practice will depend on its efforts to modernise the Bundeswehr, to implement NATO regional defence plans, to agree on assigning specific forces to these plans and to enhance NATO military exercises among others. This will in turn

depend on the level of German defence spending. There are many indications that the decision to set it at 2% of the country's GDP is once again being challenged in Germany, for various reasons.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also in part modified Germany's approach to the European Union, at least at the level of public declarations. The strategy supports EU enlargement to include Ukraine and a number of other countries. This is however combined with the demand to carry out internal reform of the EU and to boost the CFSP. However, Germany's declaratory support for Ukraine's accession fails to dispel the doubts regarding Berlin's genuine actions to facilitate EU enlargement in a reasonable timeframe. Moreover, Germany continues to view France as its main partner in the EU while failing to consider establishing a partnership with Poland, and Central Europe more broadly, in matters linked to EU enlargement and security policy. Interestingly, the document does not contain terms such as 'European strategic autonomy' or 'European sovereignty'. This likely results from Germany prioritising its efforts to strengthen NATO, to maintain good relations with the US and to avoid irritating Central and Northern European partners. On the other hand, the strategy highlights the efforts to ensure the autonomous activity of European NATO members. In the context of the upcoming US presidential election, and especially in the event of a victory of the Republican candidate, debates on European autonomy/sovereignty in security and defence will most likely re-emerge in Germany.

Worth noting is the definition of the multipolar world order that the strategy uses. Although it seems that Berlin (in particular the Chancellery, which takes greatest account of the interests of German big business) does recognise China's growing ambition and appetite for changing the international order, at the same time it refuses to acknowledge the consequences and the need to re-orient its own policy (especially in the economic sphere) more radically. The strategy towards China Chancellor Scholz is pursuing to some degree copies the policy Germany adopted vis-à-vis Russia prior to February 2022, including in the narrative aspect: despite growing systemic rivalry cooperation with China should be maintained because it is necessary to engage Beijing in efforts to resolve global problems.