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The Role of Strategic Culture in Germany's Zeitenwende

Leon Holeschovsky

Defence & Security Research Department



RESEARCH REPORT



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Written by: **Leon Holeschovsky**

Supervised by: **Michael O'Daly**

Edited by: **Stephen Crowley**

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RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shook the foundations of the European security order and fundamentally altered Germany's strategic posture. The return of large-scale interstate war to the European continent forced European governments to reassess core assumptions about peace, deterrence, and collective defence. Within NATO, the invasion signalled not simply a temporary crisis, but the end of an era dominated by expeditionary crisis management and stabilisation missions. In this sense, the war did not create a rupture, but rather accelerated and consolidated trends already visible since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Due to its hesitant attitude within the defence realm, Germany has previously been referred to as a “status-quo ally” (Keller, 2012, p. 95). However, since February 2022, Germany's defence policy has undergone a fundamental and widely acknowledged transformation. Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a “Zeitenwende” in a speech to the Bundestag on 27 February 2022, marking a break with decades of military restraint and announcing in a new era of strategic priorities (Ifri, 2025). This pivot included the creation of a €100 billion special fund for military modernisation and a pledge to consistently spend at least 2% of GDP on defence in accordance with NATO guidelines (Ifri, 2025). This marked a rupture with previous policy, as prior to the invasion, German defence spending lagged behind NATO targets, and the Bundeswehr faced shortfalls in both capability and readiness (Mölling et al, 2024). Berlin announced significant reforms aimed at accelerating procurement, investing heavily in new equipment, and revising its core military doctrine to prioritise national and collective defence (BMVg, 2023). This included dropping long-standing taboos, such as providing weapons to Ukraine, and reasserting the desire to become a leading military actor within NATO (Ifri, 2025). The *Zeitenwende* was accompanied by new Defence Policy Guidelines, declaring the need for the Bundeswehr to be ready for high-intensity warfare (BMVg, 2023). This marked a historic shift away from the national tradition of military restraint that had dominated since the end of the Cold War.

This came as a surprise to many, especially Germany's allies, largely due to the approach it adopted regarding its foreign policy in the past decades. Prior to 2022, Germany was largely characterised as a civilian power (Fix, 2018; Seppo & Joja, 2019; Handl et al). In effect, this meant that Germany shied away utilising its military as part of its foreign policy toolset. This stems from the complex and nuanced relation Germany has with its armed forces and to the use of military force, which has been characterized by experts as weak or inadequate (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2021).

To explain this sudden change of policy, this research paper will rely on the concept of strategic culture to assess the role of ideational resources mobilised by Germany to formulate its defence policy. To do so, it will first elucidate the concept of strategic culture and its relevance to the subject at hand. The specificity of Germany's strategic culture will then be outlined based on the existing literature. Then, as the conceptual framework is established, this paper will proceed with an analysis of German defence policy, clarifying the influence of strategic culture over said policy.

This research aims to offer a conceptual framework that explains the underlying cultural and ideological

factors shaping German defence policy. Understanding these strategic cultural foundations provides clearer insight into Germany's future policy choices. Misunderstanding how strategic culture influences policy can result in misguided expectations and confusion.

1. Understanding the frame in which a state formulates its foreign and security policy: the concept of strategic culture

The concept of strategic culture is key to understanding how Germany's defence policy was formulated and also provides an explanatory framework for the *Zeitenwende*. It is also central to understand divergences among European partners when it comes to foreign and defence policy. President Emmanuel Macron once stated that the development of European defence policy was severely hindered by the absence of a common European strategic culture (Tardy, 2017).

The core argument of strategic culture studies is that varying national cultures have a direct impact on the state's formulation of policies (Lantis, 2009). When the concept was first introduced, it postulated that strategic thinking results from a socialisation process that is specific to a state's culturally determined set of beliefs, attitudes, and behavioural patterns, themselves having solid historical roots (Snyder, 1977). As such, strategic culture represents a framework of languages, symbols and patterns of reasoning that shape national preferences on the application of military force in the international environment (Johnston, 1995). Strategic culture represents the collective views and preferences within a society about the use of military power, which shape norms around what foreign policy actions are seen as legitimate (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2021). Therefore, decisions on the use of military force are strongly shaped by the prevailing social beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes within a given society (Göler & Reiter, 2021). This stems from the fact that political elites socialised in different strategic cultures are likely to make different policy choices even when facing comparable circumstances, because each state interprets strategic conditions through its own cultural lens (Johnston, 1995).

Since strategic culture guides policy makers towards certain decisions while excluding others, some policy choices will thus simply not be considered due to not fitting with the ideational framework set by strategic culture (Duffield, 1999). Beliefs about what constitutes legitimate intervention determine different sets of possible actions (Finnemore, 2003). Thus, strategic culture will have a direct impact on strategic behaviour, especially on military engagements (Tappe & Doeser, 2021). Therefore, what strategic culture effectively allows for is not only the ruling out of certain behaviours or strategic reactions, but the creation of a degree of probability for future geostrategic policy (Meyer, 2005). A distinctive feature of strategic culture is thus the degree of behavioural predictability it offers based on the influence it exerts on the policy-making elite (Lantis, 2009). Understanding the strategic culture of a state could therefore provide a framework allowing it to predict policy choices of said actor (Lantis, 2009), as it creates a frame within which policy is formulated. As a consequence of the Second World War, Germany long practiced "a policy of strict military abstinence in relation to conflicts outside Europe" (Daalgaard-Nielsen, 2005, p.339). Germany's post-war policy was heavily shaped by "amilitarism and frustration with power politics" (Hoffman & Longhurst, 1999, p.147).

At its re-conception at the beginning of the Cold War, Germany's military structure was shaped in a manner that would deeply influence its strategic culture (Hoffmann & Longhurst, 1999). Other than emphasising a broad civil-military framework integrating German civil society in the armed forces, Germany's new security identity was intrinsically linked to NATO and the multilateral Western security institutions through which it emerged (Hoffmann & Longhurst 1999). Most importantly, perhaps, was the defence and deterrence posturing that would constitute the base of the army's doctrine, as the Bundeswehr was designed as a force for deterrence and defence (Hoffman & Longhurst, 1999). This was mirrored in the legal limitations imposed on deployments of the German armed forces, limited to self-defence or humanitarian/logistics missions (Hoffmann & Longhurst, 1999). In effect, during the Cold War, "the threat or actual use of military force other than for self-defence was not part of the Federal Republic's strategic culture 'tool kit'" (Hoffman & Longhurst, 1999, p. 149).

However, from the end of the Cold War onwards, Germany progressively shifted from *idealpolitik* towards *realpolitik* (Tappe and Doeser, 2021). This shift was accompanied by a normalisation dynamic that led to the acceptance that Germany should be able to act militarily if needed (Seppo & Joja, 2019). Germany, therefore, moved beyond the traditional Cold War German strategic culture for the use of armed forces (Göler & Reiter, 2021), which involved using military force solely for self-defence (Hoffmann & Longhurst, 1999) as exemplified by its participation in Afghanistan.

Despite somewhat straying from its Cold War strategic culture, Germany's strategic behaviour is marked by a "high degree of moderation, restraint and circumspection." (Malici, 2006, p. 38). Germany often preferred economic instruments whenever the option existed (Fix, 2018). While Germany's attitude towards foreign deployments of its army became more permissive since the end of the Cold War, reluctance to the offensive use of military force remained one of the main characteristics of German strategic culture (Staun, 2020). This is exemplified by Germany's refusal to partake in the intervention in Libya in 2011, at least partly attributed to opposition to the use of the Bundeswehr as a tool of foreign policy (Miskimmon, 2012). This has led experts to qualify Germany's strategic culture as "immature" (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2021, p.24). Germany's security policy is not adapted to the contemporary state of the global environment and its challenges; its strategic culture overly limiting policy choices in security policy (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2021).

Given this critical assessment of German strategic culture and that foreign and security policy rarely changes abruptly (Böller & Wenzelburger, 2024), how can the *Zeitenwende* and the subsequent massive reinvestment in defence then be explained?

2. Applying strategic culture to Germany's stance towards the conflicting prioritisation of territorial defence and crisis management

Two paradigms are the key to understanding how such a shift happened: crisis management and territorial defence. The paradigm of territorial defence entails that the defence of national territorial sovereignty is the foremost objective of the armed forces (Cotichia & Di Giulio, 2024). In the context of Germany, territorial.

defence is intrinsically linked to collective defence in the framework of NATO. On the other hand, crisis management became central after the end of the Cold War and deals with a wide spectrum of military engagements that differ from national and collective defence (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024). Germany's strategic culture has always been more permissive towards territorial defence, (Hoffmann & Longhurst, 1999), helping to explain why the *Zeitenwende* was less a revolution and more a return to a culturally ingrained posture.

The two paradigms vary in nature. While crisis management deals with a multitude of missions, such as conflict prevention, peacekeeping and humanitarian operations (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024), its main attribute is that it requires expeditionary forces. Whereas territorial defence inherently deals with a conventional adversary, crisis management engagements pit armed forces against non-state actors such as insurgents and militias (Coticchia & Moro, 2015). As such, the two paradigms differ not only in nature but also in the capability profile required by the armed forces to engage in the two differing missions. Territorial defence requires high-intensity conventional warfare capabilities and a force structure that emphasises width (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024). On the opposite side, as crisis management requires the capability to project forces in a time-sensitive manner, mobility is essential. Technological superiority takes priority over massed heavy capabilities. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance are essential in crisis management operations, and light armoured vehicles replace tanks and heavy artillery (Coticchia & Moro, 2015).

A pivotal shift towards crisis management and comprehensive operations became apparent in 2003, particularly following the adoption of the Defence Policy Guideline (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024). The interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan served as catalysts for the prioritisation of crisis management (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024). However, German participation in such missions was always marked by caution and a preference for acting only within a multilateral framework and with international mandates (Mello, 2024; Helferig, 2023). Even as subsequent reforms advanced the professionalisation of the Bundeswehr, the broader tradition of structural pacifism kept crisis management from attaining the dominant position within German defence policy (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024). The fact that crisis management missions were conducted hesitantly, often on the basis of external encouragement and under international mandates, can be directly linked to the elements of strategic culture originating in the Cold War. Namely, the reluctance to the use of military force and its absolute commitment to multilateralism (Mello, 2024).

In contrast, territorial defence remained a dominant paradigm in Germany for many years. During the Kohl administration, there was no consolidated political agreement regarding the participation of the Bundeswehr in international crisis management (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024). Throughout the 1990s, Berlin's transformation in defence policy was marked by gradual progression and limited overseas military engagement. The Ukrainian crisis in 2014 and the unsuccessful outcome of the Afghanistan mission fostered increasing scepticism about the crisis management paradigm and instigated a renewed focus on territorial defence, as articulated in the 2016 White Paper (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024). Whereas countries such as Italy

allocated more resources to crisis management-related assets in the past decades and deployed them with greater frequency in a higher volume of missions, German policymakers frequently refrained from decisive investments in either crisis management or territorial defence (Cotichia & Di Giulio, 2024).

Until the early 2010s, the structure of the Bundeswehr and associated political commissions continued to be shaped predominantly by territorial defence considerations. This slow and challenging transformation was aggravated by entrenched military bureaucracy (Cotichia & Di Giulio, 2024). Incremental reforms, notably the division of the Bundeswehr into intervention, stabilisation, and support forces, were motivated in part by increasing external expectations from NATO partners (Cotichia & Di Giulio, 2024). During the Balkans crisis, Germany's actions were heavily influenced by its desire to stay close to its allies (Maul, 2000) In fact, when the annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought territorial defence back to the forefront of defence policy, it was seen as a welcome change back to the traditional role of the Bundeswehr (Cotichia & Di Giulio, 2024), as crisis management missions were bearing a problematic stigma as a function for the German armed forces.

This enduring prioritisation of territorial defence within German strategic culture (Hoffmann & Longhurst, 1999; Cotichia & Di Giulio, 2024) provides much needed context to the rapid defence policy pivot following Russia's invasion. While crisis management enjoyed rhetorical equality post-Cold War in strategic documents in the 2000's, it faced practical reluctance to fully engage with the paradigm. Germany favoured diplomatic and economic instruments over military engagement (Fix, 2018; Blumenau, 2022), and deployments, when existent, were consistently multilateral (Mello, 2024). Germany's strategic culture was significantly more permissive towards the paradigm of territorial defence, laying the groundwork for the sudden policy shift that occurred. This explains how the recent Defence Policy Guidelines and the *Zeitenwende* speech formalised the return to territorial defence.

Conclusion

While the basis for the German defence policy shift was already present in German Cold War strategic culture, which explains the surprisingly rapid change of course, it does not mean that the *Zeitenwende* does not represent a massive shock to German identity. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia marked the ideational death of the deeply embedded German idea that war would not return to the European continent (Blumenau, 2022). The shock itself was the realisation of German policy-making elites that the use of military force as a power instrument made a comeback to Europe and to Germany's close vicinity, shattering long lasting beliefs (Bunde, 2025). Whereas previously, Germany responded to Russian aggression in 2014 with diplomatic and economic measures (Blumenau, 2022), the implosion of the German held worldview enabled the shift that followed Olaf Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech. Territorial defence was never fundamentally at odds with German strategic culture, as it was a key component of it during the Cold War. Ideationally, the obstacle to Germany becoming an active actor in the European security architecture was not to adopt a new paradigm of defence policy.

However, it should be noted that while currently Germany is culturally equipped to deal with the territorial

defence paradigm, it showed consequential shortcomings when the geostrategic environment required a different mode of operations, embodied by the paradigm of crisis management. For example, during the Bundeswehr's involvement in Afghanistan, the overall procurement process remained inadequately adapted to the requirements of expeditionary missions, resulting in notably slow responsiveness to the needs of German troops (Cotichia & Di Giulio, 2024). If in the future a shock to the international security landscape would require Germany to adopt a different and new paradigm for which its strategic culture is ill-equipped, policy-makers need to adapt quickly and not act in accordance. The rigidity that Germany displayed during the post-Cold War crisis management decades is a fundamental obstacle to a rapidly changing geostrategic environment.

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