ANALYSIS

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July 2025

Learning from the 1990s: Germany's Evolving Security Posture

From Post-Cold War Reluctance to Global Responsibility

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Contents

Introduction:

"We are experiencing a turning point (Zeitenwende). And that means: The world after is no longer the same as the world before. At its core, it's about the question of whether power can break the law, whether we allow (Russian President Vladimir Putin) Putin to turn back the clock to the time of the great powers of the 19th century, or whether we muster the strength to set limits on warmongers like Putin. This requires your own strength.". (Bundesregierung, 2022)

Many observers viewed the German Federal Chancellor's statement in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as the start of a new era in Germany's security and defense strategy.

An era in which Germany will progressively strengthen its defense capacities, lead the way not only in terms of economic power, but also in defending the sovereignty of Europe and the territorial integrity of its nation states, and pursue a more interest-led foreign policy as it was the case until that point in order to preserve peace at the continent. In more specific terms, the Zeitenwende's goal was interpreted as Germany's need to establish and defend security interests against adversaries in a transformed international arena.

In order to understand the significance of Chancellor Scholz´s speech and the potential meaning of it for Germany, we must go back in history. Germany's pre-reunification foreign and security policy was characterized by a continual balancing act between the liberal West and the left-wing authoritarian East. Naturally, this resulted from the 1945 global structural divide and the new partition of Europe between "the Communist East" headed by the Soviet Union and "the Free West," led by the United States. Germany, having lost World War II, was forced to rethink its place in the world, but it was evident that the international community—both western and eastern—wanted to stop a powerful Germany from rising again at all costs.

After the reunification and the fall of the Berlin wall it was time for Germany to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy, shattering the notion of it as a living under the protection of the Western Alliance. Early on in the reunification process, the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl emphasized Germany's development as a capable and equal member of the international community. The international community underwent a shift in the 1990s, and its guiding concepts were now continuity, community, and limits. However, it remained to be seen how quickly this process would take place in a reunited Germany and how its citizens and other peers within the international community would respond. The idea that long-standing collaboration and peace had finally returned to Europe with the conclusion of the Cold War swiftly dissipated since new conflicts were looming in the former Yugoslavia. Germany was faced with a major strategic conundrum as well as an opportunity to reposition itself in a multipolar world and reform its foreign and security policy as a result of the interstate civil wars that broke out in the former Yugoslavia.

This analysis aims to evaluate the role of Germany´s foreign and security policy when it comes to the war in Bosnian and Herzegovina 1992-1995, and the Kosovo intervention 1999 and to determine to what extent these events served as catalyst for German foreign policy restructuring.

The first part of the thesis deals with foundations of German foreign and security policy and the domestic and international processes and challenges following the reunification. The second part addresses Germany´s role and involvement in the wars in BiH and Kosovo as well as the strategic dilemma that Kohl's administration faced. Last but not least, the final part provides a brief overview of Germany's security concerns for the twenty-first century as well as the challenges facing its foreign and security policy going forward.

Research question:

Since the end of the Cold War, West German foreign and security policy has been anchored in democratic values, human rights, multilateralism, and a civilian-oriented approach. The reunification of Germany and the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars in the early 1990s marked a turning point, testing the country's capacity to redefine its international role while maintaining public support and upholding its foundational principles.

Germany's early advocacy for the recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence in 1991—despite opposition from key European partners such as France and the UK, and in defiance of warnings from the Badinter Commission—signaled a shift toward a more assertive foreign policy stance. This move strained intra-European relations and challenged Germany's post-reunification goal of deepening EU integration, particularly the Franco-German axis and broader ambitions for a more unified and influential European Union.

These tensions were compounded during the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, where Germany grappled with constitutional constraints on military engagement. The Kosovo intervention in 1999, carried out without a UN mandate, further fueled debate over Germany's evolving role in international security and the limits of its military engagement.

These developments highlighted the challenge of balancing Germany's historical restraint with growing expectations for leadership within Europe. They also laid the groundwork for the ongoing debate around Germany's strategic identity and the extent to which it should assume greater responsibility in global security affairs.

Key Questions Addressed by This Paper

→ **Post-Cold War Transformation**
How did Germany's responses to the Bosnia (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1999) wars catalyze a shift from postwar pacifism to a more proactive foreign policy?

→ **Leadership in European Security**
In what ways did Germany's involvement in the Balkan wars shape its readiness to lead in European security matters?

→ **Contemporary Policy and Zeitenwende**
How have past interventions influenced Germany's response to the Ukraine crisis, and in what ways does the concept of Zeitenwende reflect a break—or continuity—with past policies?

→ **Strategic Autonomy and Transatlantic Relations**
To what extent did the Yugoslav wars prepare Germany politically and institutionally to take on more independent responsibility for European security, particularly apart from the United States?

General Hypothesis

Since reunification, Germany has faced growing expectations to assume a leadership role in maintaining peace and stability in Europe. Following the end of the Cold War, European policymakers increasingly embraced the notion that "Europe must take responsibility for Europe," both in terms of economic resilience and collective security. The geopolitical upheavals of the 21st century—alongside efforts to establish a new global security architecture and multipolar world order—have intensified this burden.

The United States has served as a cornerstone of European security since World War II, and every German coalition agreement since reunification has emphasized the importance of the transatlantic partnership. However, recent developments—such as the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the establishment of the AUKUS trilateral security pact between the U.S., UK, and Australia (perceived by France as a betrayal due to the cancellation of a key submarine deal)—have raised concerns in Germany and across Europe regarding Washington's long-term strategic focus and commitment to European security.

Looking back, post-WWII Yugoslavia maintained relations with both West and East Germany, with formal recognition of the GDR by Belgrade in 1957 straining bilateral relations for over a decade. However, Chancellor Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik paved the way for deeper engagement beyond trade and economics.

The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s presented a critical juncture for a newly unified Germany. The wars provided an opportunity for Germany to redefine its foreign and security policy and assert its place within the Western alliance. This thesis argues that Germany's role in the Bosnian War, participation in the Dayton Peace Talks, and support for NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo marked pivotal moments in reshaping its strategic posture. These developments reflected a gradual departure from strict post-war pacifism, transitioning Germany from a civilian power (*Zivilmacht*) to a country increasingly willing to take part in international humanitarian and military missions. This trajectory set the stage for today's *Zeitenwende*—the debate over whether Germany can truly meet expectations as a European security guarantor, capable of acting independently of the U.S. while closely cooperating with its European partners.

Auxiliary Hypotheses

- → Germany's early recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence, followed by its initial hesitance during the onset of the Bosnian War, illustrates the internal conflict between upholding pacifist principles and fulfilling emerging geopolitical responsibilities.
- → The evolution of Germany's approach to the Yugoslav conflicts highlights the influence of European unity concerns, geopolitical ambition, and historical sensitivities around nationalism.
- → The 1995 Srebrenica genocide served as a turning point in German foreign policy, exposing the tension between Germany's moral commitment to humanitarian intervention and its political reluctance to act decisively.
- → Despite a rhetorical commitment to "European security," Germany's actions during the Balkan conflicts reveal an enduring dependence on U.S. military leadership and the European Union's limited capacity to act as a unified strategic actor.

The Development of Civilian Power

Germany's foreign policy identity has been shaped by its complex historical trajectory—from Imperial and Nazi Germany to post-war division and eventual reunification (Marsh, 2002). This legacy continues to inform its strategic culture, often marked by caution and a deep aversion to the use of military force. Many observers argue that post-Cold War Germany struggles to address contemporary security challenges effectively (Giegerich & Terhalle, 2021).

Krauss and Maull (2020) describe Germany's strategic mindset through three guiding principles: "politics before force," "never alone" (favoring multilateralism), and "never again" (rejecting militarism). Maull (1990) introduced the idea of Germany as a "civilian power"—a state that advances its international goals through non-military means such as diplomacy, economic strength, and multilateral cooperation.

During the Cold War, West Germany became known as a "trading state" whose global influence stemmed from economic success rather than military might. This gave rise to a distinct foreign policy model characterized by value-based diplomacy, support for supranational institutions, and a willingness to limit national sovereignty in favor of cooperation (Marsh).

Gül (2009) argues that the civilian power concept draws from both constructivist and realist traditions. It emphasizes identity, historical memory, and moral principles in shaping foreign policy—placing less weight on coercion and more on legitimacy, persuasion, and soft power, in line with Hill's (1990) notion of civilian engagement. Civilian powers, Hill contends, favor transparent diplomacy and inclusive public discourse. Similarly, Stavridis (2001) highlights democratic oversight and openness in foreign policy as core tenets of this model.

Demirtas and Mazlum (2018) note that during the Cold War, states like Germany and Japan and the EU institutionalized this civilian approach—abandoning aggressive doctrines and embedding pacifism in law, military structures, and public policy. Germany's Basic Law, restrictions on WMDs, and the civilianization of the *Bundeswehr* all exemplify this shift (Marsh).

While Maull sees Germany's civilian power identity as a pragmatic strategy to achieve post-war goals, Marsh emphasizes its deeper roots in Germany's historical need to decisively break from its militarist past.

Between Multilateralism and National Interest

Gaskarth and Oppermann (2019) identify four traditions shaping German foreign policy: **regionalism** (emphasizing post-sovereign identity), **pacifism** (rejecting militarism), **realism** (prioritizing national interest), and **hegemonism** (responsibility through strength). These are closely tied to Germany's historical guilt and are seen not as fixed ideologies but as evolving frameworks shaped by belief systems.

Germany has been framed variously as a European power, civilian power, normal power, and reluctant hegemon. The tension between "never again war" and "never again Auschwitz" became especially pronounced during the 1990s, as Germany faced pressure to respond to conflicts in the Balkans, Somalia, and Rwanda—prompting a rethinking of its civilian power stance (Gaskarth & Oppermann).

Foreign cultural policy was another key element of Germany's civilian image. Through institutions like the Goethe Institute, Germany aimed to rebuild trust and boost its global standing (Hülsse, 2009). However, since the mid-1990s, this strategy evolved into a more commercially driven "image policy," promoting Germany as a global economic hub—or what Hülsse calls a "Catwalk power."

The debate over Germany's role—whether it is a trading state, a civilian power, or a rising normal power—reflects the enduring influence of its history. The trauma of WWII, Germany's role in Nazi atrocities, and its postwar occupation and division deeply shaped both public opinion and elite consensus, favoring restraint and multilateralism (Giegerich & Terhalle).

While reunification in 1990 marked a shift, authors like Crawford (2010) argue that West Germany had already built substantial power under the civilian power framework—subordinating national ambitions to international institutions while expanding conventional state capacities.

The foundations of the modern Federal Republic were laid with the 1948 Six-Power Conference in London (Steininger, 1998), signaling early Western alignment and setting the tone for a state built on multilateral engagement, economic cooperation, and a deep commitment to peace.

From Adenauer to Kohl

The first federal elections in West Germany on August 14, 1949, enabled Konrad Adenauer's CDU/CSU to form a coalition with the FDP and DP (Hasselbach, 2024). As Chancellor, Adenauer prioritized reconciliation with France and advocated for a united Western Europe, integrating West Germany into Western institutions as an equal partner. According to Gül, his Westpolitik aimed at both westernization—reconciling with the West—and supranationalization—rejecting nationalist ideologies in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Adenauer pursued alliances with Washington, Paris, and London, and supported participation in the EEC and ECSC. Despite Soviet attempts to lure Germany into neutrality in 1952 (Steigner, 1998), Adenauer aligned firmly with the West. A key milestone came in 1955 when West Germany joined NATO, solidifying its Western integration. As Marsh notes, NATO membership restored Germany's security standing without alarming allies, while allowing West Germany to benefit significantly under the alliance's nuclear umbrella.

By the end of Adenauer's tenure in 1963, West Germany had transitioned from a dependent state to a central Western actor. His successor, Willy Brandt, won the 1969 elections and introduced Ostpolitik—a policy shift that emphasized improving ties with Eastern Europe and East Germany. This "change through rapprochement" strategy (Deutschlandfunk, 2013) marked a departure from the Hallstein Doctrine, promoting dialogue over confrontation. As Gül notes, Brandt's cabinet acknowledged "two states in one nation," and signed key treaties, such as the 1970 Moscow Treaty, recognizing borders and paving the way for East and West Germany to join the UN in 1973 (Baerbock, 2023).

Brandt's successor, Helmut Schmidt, became Chancellor in 1974. Unlike Brandt, Schmidt factored in global power shifts, particularly China's role, and believed negotiations with the USSR required military parity (Spohr, 2016). He remained committed to détente but emphasized stability and strategic balance in managing East-West relations (Gül).

In 1982, internal coalition disagreements led to Schmidt's resignation. Helmut Kohl of the CDU succeeded him and reaffirmed the FRG's commitment to NATO, the U.S., and European unity (Ash, 1993). Although Kohl's foreign policy echoed Adenauer's Westpolitik, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher maintained continuity with Ostpolitik. Gül credits Genscher with fostering East-West cooperation, reviving the Western European Union, and supporting Gorbachev's reform efforts. Despite tensions between Kohl and Genscher, their collaboration was pivotal during the reunification process.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Kohl unveiled a ten-point plan toward reunification (Larres, 1998). Initial skepticism from international leaders gave way to negotiations as the Soviet Union, under economic pressure, shifted its stance. By mid-1990, Gorbachev conditionally agreed to German NATO membership, aided by Western financial incentives and assurances (Adomeit, 2006; National Security Archive, 2017).

Key concerns included Germany's military status, NATO expansion, and European security arrangements. Baker's "nine points" offered reassurances to the USSR, including no NATO troops in former GDR territory during the transition (Gorskii, 2001). Economic and social union between East and West Germany began with the July 1990 treaty introducing the Deutsche Mark (Gül).

Reunification was finalized through the Two Plus Four Treaty, granting Germany full sovereignty (Bundesregierung, 2020). On October 3, 1990, Germany was officially unified, and Berlin was named the capital the following year.

Adenauer's Westpolitik and Brandt's Ostpolitik left a lasting legacy. Merkel's EU-focused leadership echoed Adenauer's vision of integration (Rankin, 2021), while Schröder's energy partnerships with Russia reflected Brandt's pragmatic engagement—though Schröder's policies later faced criticism amid rising tensions with Moscow (SWR, 2005). These dual strategies continue to shape German foreign policy as it navigates evolving global challenges.

Germany's Post-Reunification Global Role

Following reunification, scholars have debated Germany's evolving foreign and security policy, particularly whether it would revert to traditional power politics (Geopolitik) or maintain its postwar restraint. Meiers (2002) argues that the core question has been how Germany should engage globally without assuming that it lacked power under the Bonn Republic; rather, its foreign policy was shaped by an expectation to remain pacifist and multilateral.

Two main schools of thought emerged. One, outlined by Forsberg (2005), feared a more assertive Germany—a "Fourth Reich" scenario driven by neorealist and culturalist views. The opposing perspective, grounded in constructivist and institutionalist theories, believed Germany would remain embedded in multilateral institutions, prioritizing peaceful engagement over unilateralism.

Germany's cautious post-Cold War approach may have misread international expectations. Siahamis (2013) and Dorff (1997) argue that Germany, seen by allies as a potential security provider, continued to act as a "civilian power"—a state avoiding military solutions, relying instead on economic and institutional tools. Domestically, debates around normalization reflected tensions between maintaining this restraint and adopting a more typical Western posture.

While reunification and the end of the Cold War lifted structural constraints, Germany's strategic behavior remained largely consistent, defying neorealist predictions of military assertiveness or nuclear ambitions. The country's role became increasingly entwined with European integration—evidenced by the Maastricht Treaty and EU eastern enlargement. Lang et al. (2017) emphasize the influence of supranational institutions on German domestic policy and identity, noting that "outside-in" European pressures shaped internal changes more than Germany's own attempts to shape Europe ("inside-out").

In sum, Germany's post-reunification foreign policy trajectory illustrates a balance between historical caution, institutional embedding, and growing international responsibility—without a clear return to aggressive Geopolitik.

Germany's Leadership and the Independence of Slovenia and Croatia

*Germany's recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence in 1991 marked a defining moment for its post-Cold War foreign policy. Though constrained by semi-sovereignty throughout much of the Cold War, West Germany steadily asserted itself internationally through the lens of "civilian power," aligning national interests with multilateralism (Crawford, 1996). However, even in this constrained phase, it occasionally pursued self-serving goals—such as exporting dual-use technol*ogies to unstable (conflict) states—revealing its growing autonomy as a "trading state."

This evolving assertiveness shaped Germany's response to Yugoslavia's unraveling. The declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991 were central to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Both states faced immediate resistance from the federal army, under control of Belgrade, and the European Community (EC) initially pushed for negotiation and restraint (Zipfel, 1996). But Germany soon broke ranks.

Domestic and historical factors—ranging from refugee inflows to ties with the Croatian diaspora and Germany's own recent reunification—played a role. Lantis (2002) notes the influential role of the Croatian diaspora, which funded Franjo Tuđman's Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), while Denitch (1994) highlights the HDZ's exclusionary nationalist policies. In Slovenia, the DEMOS coalition ran on a pro-European, anti-communist platform (Nation, 2003), while Serbian President Slobodan Milošević doubled down on centralization and ethnic nationalism (Woodward, 1995).

Despite early consensus in Germany to preserve the national integrety of Yugoslavia, political positions shifted dramatically by mid-1991. A parliamentary consensus emerged in favor of recognizing Slovenia's and Croatia's independence. Foreign Minister Genscher played a key role, arguing Milošević's actions showed a clear move toward a Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia (Arbutina and Breuer, 2011). Germany formally announced its recognition of both states on December 23, 1991, ahead of the agreed EC date of January 15, 1992.

This move, seen by some as unilateral, fractured European unity and, according to critics, may have accelerated the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. France, in contrast, viewed the situation as an ethnic conflict rather than Serbian aggression, and saw Germany as Croatia's protector (Maull & Stahl, 2002). German leaders, however, justified their stance by invoking the right to self-determination—an echo of their own reunification experience (Witte, 2000).

While public support in Germany demanded a stronger response, the country's reluctance to use force limited its strategic effectiveness. Van Heuven (1993) criticizes this as a key weakness, noting that Germany's moral leadership wasn't backed by military credibility. Still, Germany's leaders—Kohl, Genscher, and Kinkel—remained committed to cooperative diplomacy (Malici, 2006), even as critics like Hodge (1998) argue that Germany's early recognition contributed to the West's broader failure in the Balkans.

War in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Strategic Dilemma: Never War Again?

The Bosnian War (1992–1995), marked by ethnic cleansing and mass atrocities, exposed the violent collapse of Yugoslavia and the cost of delayed international intervention. It also forced Germany—historically committed to pacifism after WWII—to confront deep ethical and constitutional dilemmas around military engagement.

The 1990 elections in Bosnia produced ethnically aligned parties: the SDA (34%), SDS (30%), and HDZ (18%) (Nation). Rising nationalism and ethnic division intensified after Germany recognized Slovenia and Croatia, prompting Bosniak and Croat leaders to seek independence. Despite a Serb boycott, a 1992 referendum yielded a 99% pro-independence vote, leading to international recognition on April 6. Bosnian Serbs responded by declaring Republika Srpska and launching an armed campaign (Calic, 2019).

Germany, despite supporting independence movements, largely maintained its pacifist stance. The Gulf War had already revealed tensions between German pacifism and alliance expectations, with leaders like Kohl and Genscher prioritizing diplomatic over military tools (Malici). Constitutional constraints also barred *Bundeswehr* deployment outside NATO territory (Gül), reinforcing the belief that foreign policy should be guided by Friedenspolitik (Berenskoetter & Giegerich, 2010).

The Bosnian War intensified this debate. In July 1992, the UN requested German logistical support (Lantis 2002), and NATO sought German participation in the Adriatic embargo enforcement. Though conservatives supported involvement, opposition from the SPD, FDP, and Greens centered around constitutional limits and pacifist principles (Schmidt, 1996; Lantis; Kiefer, 1992). Prominent voices like Green politician Helmut Lippelt acknowledged the moral dilemma of opposing atrocities while rejecting force.

By July 1992, Germany cautiously joined monitoring missions. CDU minister Christian Schwarz-Schilling and his party colleague Stefan Schwarz pushed for action, with Schwarz-Schilling resigning in protest of inaction, saying, "I am ashamed to be part of this government" (Cero, 2018). Both of them, in later interviews, criticized Europe's slow response, arguing for a stronger German and EU role in stabilizing the Balkans and reforming Bosnia's post-war framework (Cero, 2017; 2018).

Despite public skepticism—65% opposed military engagement (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1992)—Germany became a major humanitarian donor, receiving over 220,000 refugees and providing 8% of Western aid between 1992–1993 (Hodge; Witte). Still, Bonn's push for a peaceful solution failed to prevent escalation. Efforts like the Geneva conference and the Vance-Owen plan showed limited effect, while legal and historical barriers prevented lifting the arms embargo aganst Bosnia-Herzegovina (Berenskoetter & Giegerich; Witte).

Germany's hesitance underscored the limits of civilian power. Diplomatic recognition without military deterrence, as Van Heuven argued, left Belgrade unchallenged and Bosnia vulnerable. The war exposed the fragility of European security structures and forced a reevaluation of Germany's post-Cold War role.

Genocide in Srebrenica: A Turning Point in Discourse, Not in Policy

By 1994, Germany's post-Cold War security posture had shifted. Parliament amended asylum laws in 1993, and the 1994 White Paper formally acknowledged the *Bundeswehr's* growing role beyond NATO (Dorff, 1999). Meiers sees the paper as the most comprehensive post–Cold War security document, explicitly stating that "Germany's territorial integrity… is not existentially threatened," a view echoed in 2000 (Berenskoetter & Giegerich). Despite ongoing reluctance, calls to revise the Basic Law to allow broader military engagement gained traction.

The Federal Constitutional Court's landmark July 12, 1994 ruling clarified that Article 24 permitted participation in multilateral military missions, including NATO and UN operations in the Adriatic, Somalia, and Bosnia (Bundesverfassungsgericht, 1994). This legal green light intensified pressure on the Kohl government to contribute militarily in Bosnia. Yet Kohl hesitated, avoiding action before the October 1994 election (Berenskoetter & Giegerich).

Key decisions—such as deploying AWACS aircraft and Tornado fighter jets—sparked political and public backlash. Legal challenges from the SPD and FDP were ultimately dismissed (Witte). Even after the Court's decision, skepticism remained, including within the governing coalition, with Foreign Minister Kinkel expressing reservations.

Nonetheless, in summer 1995, Germany joined Operation Deliberate Force, contributing 14 Tornado aircraft—marking the Bundeswehr's first combat deployment (Rühe, 2014). Opting out might have undermined European unity and contradicted Germany's post-Holocaust moral obligations (Berenskoetter & Giegerich). Still, the intervention came too late to prevent the July 1995 genocide in Srebrenica, where over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were killed after the UN-declared safe area fell to Bosnian Serb forces.

Germany, along with the broader international community, failed to uphold its responsibility. In a 2018 interview, former Foreign Minister Kinkel admitted the deep personal impact of Srebrenica and criticized the misplaced trust in the UN and the delays in international response (Cero, 2018). He cited failures to lift the arms embargo and to react decisively to earlier atrocities across Bosnia.

Similarly, Green MP Marie-Luise Beck, also interviewed in 2018, recalled her shift from pacifism to supporting intervention after witnessing the war's realities during a 1993 Bundestag delegation visit. She later broke with her party to vote in favor of German military involvement (Cero, 2018).

Journalist Rolf Paasch later observed that, "there could be no talk of German foreign policy in the summer of 1995." For him, Srebrenica marked a rhetorical shift from "Never again war" to a more actionable "Never again Auschwitz" (Paasch, 2005). However, this moral clarity had limited influence on immediate policy.

Germany's experience in Bosnia—especially its delayed response to Srebrenica—reflects a broader hesitance to match ethical discourse with timely action. It remains a lesson in the costs of inaction and the importance of aligning rhetoric with responsibility.

Dayton Peace Agreement: Germany's Role in Shaping Post-War Bosnia

The Dayton peace negotiations began on November 1, 1995, at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke led talks with the presidents of Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia, alongside negotiators from the five Contact Group countries—including Germany—and EU mediator Carl Bildt. Although the U.S. dominated the process, Germany played a key supporting role.

Negotiations were guided by four principles from the 1994 Contact Group proposal: a 51–49% territorial split between the Federation and Republika Srpska; contiguous entities; Sarajevo as an undivided capital; and minimal deviation from the October 10 ceasefire lines (Neville-Jones, 1996).

While France and the UK were more open to partitioning Bosnia, Germany supported the U.S. in insisting on Bosnia's territorial integrity and Sarajevo's unity (Witte). Germany also pushed to include binding arms limitations for all parties, though this conflicted with U.S. plans to rearm the Bosnian government. A compromise was reached with a commitment to future disarmament talks, held later that year in Bonn (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1995).

Germany's Political Director, Wolfgang Ischinger, played a key role in the Dayton process, particularly in strengthening the Muslim-Croat Federation and advocating for human rights protections. His efforts secured the inclusion of the European Convention on Human Rights in Annex Six of the agreement (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1995), marking a significant contribution to post-war governance and legal standards.

Germany also prioritized involving Russia in both diplomatic and military implementation of the peace plan. Foreign Minister Kinkel emphasized that Russian participation was essential for the success and legitimacy of NATO's role in Bosnia (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 1995). This strategy helped ensure wider international support for the agreement's enforcement.

After three weeks of intense negotiations, the Dayton Peace Agreement was formally signed on December 14, 1995, in Paris—ending the war and committing the international community to rebuilding Bosnia.

European intervention forces in Bosnia: The first direct combat mission of the Bundeswehr

Following the Dayton Peace Agreement, NATO deployed the Implementation Force (IFOR) in December 1995 to enforce military provisions of the peace accord—separating warring factions, overseeing troop withdrawals, and demilitarizing conflict zones. IFOR laid the groundwork for lasting peace and trust-building. A year later, IFOR transitioned to the Stabilisation Force (SFOR), with a broader mandate to maintain security and support Bosnia's reconstruction, refugee return, and military reform (NATO, 2024). Together, IFOR and SFOR marked NATO's transformation into a post–Cold War crisis management actor.

Even before Dayton was finalized, Germany signaled its readiness to contribute Bundeswehr personnel, mainly in logistical and support roles (Gül). Following a Bundestag vote in December 1995—with 543 in favor and 107 opposed—the deployment was approved (Lantis). This marked Germany's first major postwar overseas military operation. The initial contingent of 3,000 troops provided medical and transport support, primarily alongside French forces, but also included a battalion of 80 elite troops deployed to Srebrenica, the only German unit with potential combat duties (Lantis).

With the transition to SFOR in December 1996, Germany expanded its role to include combat units, reflecting a more active stance in NATO-led peace operations (Meiers). Under SFOR, previous limitations on German troops were lifted, allowing participation on equal footing with other NATO members.

Public opinion throughout the 1990s showed general support for NATO (rising from 57% in 1991 to 71% in 1995), but German involvement in specific missions remained contentious. While 74% supported NATO's role in crises near Europe's borders, only 48% backed German participation in the NATO-UN Rapid Reaction Force for Bosnia, with 46% opposed (Lantis). A 1994 survey found 52% of Germans opposed deploying Tornado aircraft to Bosnia, despite 42% supporting it (Dorff). These figures reflect a persistent culture of restraint in public attitudes toward the Bundeswehr's combat role.

Germany's involvement in IFOR and SFOR marked a watershed in its foreign and security policy, signaling a cautious yet decisive step into international peacekeeping and out-of-area NATO operations.

Building on this legacy and in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany rejoined the EUFOR Althea mission in 2022, reaffirming its commitment to peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina within a broader European security framework. This deployment aligns with the EU's Strategic Compass, a policy aimed at enhancing collective defense and crisis management capabilities through closer cooperation among member states.

The 1999 Kosovo Intervention

Despite the Dayton Agreement, instability in the former Yugoslavia continued. The rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in 1996, amid worsening human rights abuses and economic crisis, escalated into violent conflict. The Račak massacre in January 1999 became the decisive trigger for Western intervention to prevent another "Bosnia" (Calic). Maull and Stahl argue that Dayton's exclusion of Kosovo weakened non-violent resistance, unintentionally contributing to the violence.

Germany initially pushed for a diplomatic resolution via the Contact Group, OSCE, and the EU. However, after failed negotiations in early 1999 and growing pressure from the U.S. and U.K., the new SPD–Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder faced a critical decision: support NATO's offensive without a UN mandate, or risk fracturing the alliance—and the coalition itself (Berenskoetter and Giegerich). This clashed with the government's stated priority of civilian conflict prevention.

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, despite his party's pacifist roots, supported intervention to prevent genocide, referencing both German history and moral responsibility. His guiding principle—"never again Auschwitz"—justified the shift (Behnke, 2012). Nonetheless, internal opposition was strong, with figures like Oskar Lafontaine publicly criticizing NATO's approach and ultimately resigning from the cabinet (Miskimmon, 2009).

The Social Democrats ultimately supported NATO's Operation Allied Force (OAF), launched on March 24, 1999. Germany contributed 14 Tornado aircraft for reconnaissance and electronic countermeasures (Gül). While limited in scale, Germany's role was symbolically important. Schröder and Fischer also led diplomatic efforts to secure a peace plan and Russian cooperation, helping bring about Milošević's capitulation in June 1999 (Malici).

Public opinion remained largely supportive: prior to OAF, 55% backed Bundestag authorization for intervention, and support for airstrikes never dropped below 50% during the campaign—even after the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy (Friedrich et al., 2000). However, support for deploying ground troops was much lower, with notable resistance, especially in eastern Germany.

Despite its participation, Germany's foreign policy retained core elements of continuity. As Miskimmon notes, German attitudes toward military force remained cautious, shaped by historical memory and constitutional limits—particularly the requirement of Bundestag approval for deployments.

Nonetheless, the Kosovo intervention marked a turning point. Alongside Bosnia, it signaled Germany's willingness to engage militarily abroad in defense of humanitarian principles. Though domestically contentious, these operations reshaped Germany's postwar identity, positioning it as a more active—if cautious—partner in international crisis management.

Since reu*nification, Germany's foreign policy has become increasingly shaped by ideological pluralism rather than a unified national perspective. While Cold War divisions between the CDU/CSU and SPD—such as debates over Westintegration and Ostpolitik—already highlighted divergent worldviews, post-1990 developments have further fragmented the landscape. U.S. officials, including Robert Hutchings of the National Security Council, closely followed the 1990 elections, favoring the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition due to shared transatlantic priorities (Hofmann, 2019).*

Drawing on Poliout, Keohane, and Mearsheimer, Hofmann notes that views on multilateralism vary: some parties treat it as an end, others as a means, while some lean toward unilateralism. The rise of new parties—especially Die Linke (formerly PDS) and the AfD—has heightened ideological polarization in the Bundestag. These actors differ on core foreign policy questions: the legitimacy and venue for the use of military force, the role of NATO, and the future of EU defense cooperation.

Lang et al. argue that growing politicization of foreign policy is linked to the erosion of the traditional CDU/CSU-SPD-FDP dominance. The Greens' rise in the 1980s challenged the status quo, but it was the emergence of Die Linke that marked Germany's full transition into a multiparty system, complicating coalition-building and policymaking.

According to Hofmann, no single foreign policy identity unites Germany's political actors. Germany may be framed as assertive, independent, or embedded—depending on the context and political lens. Concepts like national culture, power, or strategic role serve as "boundary concepts" that reflect flexible and contested understandings of what is politically acceptable. This flexibility, she argues, enables competing value systems to coexist and influence foreign policy decisions.

German Security Interests in the 21st Century

Germany's post–Cold War security policy has shifted from territorial defense to a broader focus on international diplomacy, humanitarian interventions, and collective security—starting with its involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo, its first major military deployments since WWII. These missions helped redefine Germany's defense posture, though its security interests remain fluid, shaped by global power shifts, technological change, and emerging threats.

Masala (2009) identifies four major developments influencing Germany's strategic environment: the rise of great powers, the weakening of multilateral institutions, the decline of the political West, and the emergence of new security challenges. He warns that multipolarity—led by actors like Russia and China—may turn confrontational if rising powers perceive the global order as illegitimate. U.S. disengagement from treaty-based multilateralism, particularly under NATO, has also weakened the institutions central to German security. This creates tension for Germany, which relies heavily on multilateral frameworks.

Domestically, skepticism toward military engagement persisted until the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine. A 2017 Pew survey cited by Bunde shows only 40% of Germans supported defending NATO allies against Russia. Masala argues this declining trust in multilateralism suggests the West no longer functions as a cohesive political actor.

Germany's role in shaping the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) emerged in the 1990's but has often been marked by selective engagement (Gross, 2007). Though Germany faced pressure to commit forces, it remained reluctant to take a leading role. Chancellor Schröder later sought a more prominent NATO presence, signaling a break from historical restraint.

The Trump administration's criticism of NATO raised further concerns about transatlantic reliability, prompting calls for Germany to reassess its strategic posture. Bahr (2007) adds that today's geopolitical landscape—marked by great power competition, resource struggles, and regional volatility—creates a "crisis arc" from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. Unlike Masala, Bahr also stresses the long-term threat of terrorism and the ideological risks posed by non-state violence, exemplified by the 9/11 attacks.

Seppo and Joja (2019) emphasize that Germany's evolving strategic culture—shifting from pacifism to 'normality' in military engagement—has increased its leadership role in European security. This includes participation in NATO's Framework Nations Concept (FNC) and the EU's PESCO initiative, where Germany acts as an "anchor army" for smaller partners. These efforts reflect Berlin's growing ambitions, although persistent shortcomings in defense readiness have limited its credibility.

The notion of *Zeitenwende*, introduced by Chancellor Scholz after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, marks a potential turning point in German defense policy. It signals an intent to move beyond historical restraint and toward a more assertive and capable strategic posture.

Germany's future security strategy will depend on how it balances internal political constraints with external demands, adapting to a rapidly evolving international landscape while strengthening its role within NATO and the EU.

The Zeitenwende

Chancellor Olaf Scholz's 2022 *Zeitenwende* speech, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, signaled a turning point in Germany's security and defense policy. Framing it as a historical shift, Scholz outlined five strategic goals: supporting Ukraine, deterring Russian aggression through sanctions, strengthening NATO cooperation, enhancing German security via defense and energy investments, and promoting peace through diplomacy (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, n.d.).

In concrete terms, the government created a €100 billion special defense fund, constitutionally anchored to rebuild the *Bundeswehr* (Bundesministerium der Finanzen, 2022). Germany also introduced its first National Security Strategy (Auswärtiges Amt, 2023), expanding its defense budget and modernizing military capabilities. Simultaneously, Germany overhauled its energy policy, ending dependence on Russian imports through diversification and rapid infrastructure adjustments, including LNG terminals and conservation measures (Bundesregierung, 2023).

The EU, with Germany's backing, imposed extensive sanctions on Russia and Belarus, targeting individuals, sectors, and strategic exports/imports, while also cutting Russian banks from SWIFT and banning Russian aviation and maritime trade (European Council, n.d.; European Commission, n.d.).

Yet critics question the depth of Germany's transformation. Tallis (2024) argues that Scholz's government has failed to fully acknowledge the urgency of a decisive Ukrainian victory. Though Germany has been the second-largest donor after the U.S., its aid remains modest relative to GDP, and delays in critical arms deliveries have drawn criticism. Scholz's reluctance to clearly state that Ukraine must win, Tallis contends, undermines Germany's credibility.

A GLOBSEC (2023) report highlights persistent shortcomings in implementation. The *Bundeswehr* remains under-equipped and outdated, with limited combat readiness and aging technology such as 40-year-old radios. The military lacks the capacity to sustain operations beyond a few days—far below NATO's standard.

Griegerich and Schreer (2023) argue that the €100 billion fund is insufficient, especially as inflation and interest rates erode its value. Despite the financial significance of the special fund, progress has been slow and uneven. Many procurement projects have been mismanaged or delayed, raising doubts about the effectiveness of current defense planning and oversight. Moreover, the *Bundeswehr* continues to suffer from a shortage of qualified personnel, while a comprehensive and effective recruitment strategy remains absent. These shortcomings suggest that financial investment alone is not sufficient; systemic reforms in procurement, personnel management, and strategic planning are equally critical to making the *Bundeswehr* fit for purpose in a dramatically changing security environment.

Cultural resistance to military engagement also lingers. A 2023 poll showed only 11% of Germans would defend the country in case of attack, compared to 83% of Finns in 2022 (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 2023; Yle, 2022). Strategic cultural change remains a slow process.

Germany's internal political turmoil has further complicated the *Zeitenwende*. In late 2024, Scholz dismissed Finance Minister Lindner over economic disputes, leading to the collapse of the coalition and triggering early elections. The fallout has intensified debate over Germany's leadership direction amidst geopolitical uncertainty. The new German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has signaled a more assertive approach to defense policy, including a proposed increase of defense spending to 5% of GDP—well beyond NATO's 2% benchmark. Such a shift would mark a significant escalation of Germany's military ambitions and could reshape the country's role in European and transatlantic security frameworks, potentially lending new momentum to the goals originally outlined in the *Zeitenwende* speech. As one analyst notes, Germany is now positioning itself as "Europe's security guarantor of last resort" amid growing concerns about the reliability of U.S. commitments (The Conversation, 2024). In line with this new posture, Germany's Chief of Defence has ordered the "swift expansion of warfare capabilities" by 2029, signaling a move toward full-spectrum readiness and modernization of its armed forces (Reuters, 2025).

Externally, Germany faces renewed an very acute anxiety over transatlantic relations following Donald Trump's reelection. Trump-aligned figures, like Vice Presidet J.D. Vance, have ridiculed the *Zeitenwende* (Tenenbaum and Peria-Peigne, 2023), and Scholz's previous backing of Biden underscores German concerns over future U.S. policy reliability.

In sum, the *Zeitenwende* marks an ambitious reorientation in German strategy, but its success depends on sustained political will, cultural adaptation, and credible follow-through—both domestically and in partnership with allies.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed Germany's post-reunification foreign and security policy, focusing on its evolving role in European and global security. It examined how the Yugoslav wars shaped Germany's approach to military interventions and peacekeeping, as well as how international shifts—particularly the U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific—spurred increased expectations of German leadership within the EU and NATO.

The findings confirm that Germany's experience during the Balkan conflicts marked a turning point. Actions such as early recognition of Croatian and Slovenian independence and participation in NATO-led missions in Bosnia and Kosovo reflected a departure from post-WWII military restraint. Germany's transformation from a "civilian power" to a more assertive actor culminated in the 1999 Kosovo intervention, where it acted without a UN mandate—highlighting the balancing act between historical caution, humanitarian imperatives, and alliance responsibilities.

This evolution did not occur in a vacuum. The post-9/11 security environment, shaped by the U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Russia's increasing assertiveness—from Georgia in 2008 to the annexation of Crimea in 2014—placed new pressures on NATO members. Germany faced growing calls to assume greater military responsibility, both within the alliance and in the broader international system.

Despite steps toward military normalization, Germany remains a security recipient—de facto still reliant on American forces stationed on its territory. This enduring dependence complicates its aspirations for strategic autonomy and limits its ability to fully transition into a leadership role in global security. Historically, Germany emphasized a strictly civilian and normative foreign policy approach. The shift toward military engagement—symbolized by the Kosovo intervention and later reaffirmed by the *Zeitenwende*—marks a significant but still contested reorientation.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz's 2022 *Zeitenwende* speech, delivered in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, further solidified this shift. Germany's €100 billion defense fund and renewed commitment to military readiness underline its efforts to adapt to a volatile geopolitical environment. However, the *Zeitenwende* has not gone unchallenged. Domestic skepticism persists, and concrete policy decisions—such as the prolonged hesitation over whether to supply Taurus long-range missiles to Ukraine—have raised questions about the depth and durability of Germany's strategic transformation.

While Germany has taken meaningful steps toward greater military engagement, it still faces internal debate and external pressures. Its future role in global security will hinge on balancing historical pacifism with growing international responsibilities, even as it navigates the legacy of its dependence on allied protection.

Key Policy Recommendations

First, Germany must follow through on long-term defense spending, focusing not only on meeting NATO commitments but also on enhancing cyber defense and developing cutting-edge military technologies. The initial €100 billion fund provided a critical boost, but its one-time nature is insufficient given the scale of evolving threats. The recently approved €500 billion fund could be transformative—if directed strategically—by enabling sustained modernization of Germany's armed forces and dual-use infrastructure, fostering resilience across both military and civilian sectors over the next decade.

Second, Germany should take a leading role in revitalizing NATO and EU defense frameworks, including Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which offers a platform for deeper European collaboration. In a fragmented geopolitical landscape, German leadership is vital for promoting burden-sharing, interoperability, and collective defense planning, especially in high-risk regions like Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Doing so will also strengthen Germany's credibility as a dependable ally and bridge between European and transatlantic partners.

Third, to align national policy with societal values, Germany must engage its public more directly in conversations about security, defense, and international responsibility. Transparent communication about global threats and Germany's evolving role can help shift perceptions shaped by decades of military restraint. A more informed and involved public is essential for sustaining political will behind long-term defense commitments and legitimizing Germany's active engagement in international crisis management.

Fourth, Germany must spearhead a forward-looking and integrated security strategy that goes beyond conventional defense. This means addressing not only traditional military threats but also emerging challenges like cyber warfare, disinformation, and the security implications of climate change. By adopting a whole-of-government approach that blends diplomacy, resilience, and defense innovation, Germany can set a new standard for 21st-century security policy.

Fifth, Germany should broaden its security footprint by cultivating partnerships beyond the transatlantic sphere, particularly with democracies like Japan and South Korea. These relationships can bolster regional stability and provide new venues for joint exercises, defense technology sharing, and diplomatic alignment on global norms. In tandem, Germany's commitment to peacekeeping and multilateral institutions remains crucial for reinforcing a rules-based international order.

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Learning from the 1990s: Germany's Evolving Security Posture

Germany's Strategic Dilemma

Despite steps toward military normalization, Germany remains a security recipient—de facto still reliant on American forces stationed on its territory. This enduring dependence complicates its aspirations for strategic autonomy and limits its ability to fully transition into a leadership role in global security. Historically, Germany emphasized a strictly civilian and normative foreign policy approach. The shift toward military engagement—symbolized by the Kosovo intervention and later reaffirmed by the Zeitenwende—marks a significant but still contested reorientation.

Further information on this topic can be found here:
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