

LETTER FROM BERLIN



Germany's Security Failure

Bumbling Chancellor Scholz puts the West at risk.

BY KLAUS C. ENGELEN

“**A**t first it meant a ‘historical shift’ that happened to Germany, now the term ‘Zeitenwende’ is widely used to describe the country’s much-needed foreign and security policy rethink,” says Benjamin Tallis, head of the Action Group Zeitenwende at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

He warns that “Germany’s security transformation remains incomplete. On its current track, it is also dangerously inadequate. Despite the manufactured budgetary crisis, the Scholz government needs to finish the task it started.”

Tallis continues: “While most Action Group members still see the *Zeitenwende* as it was initially conceived as being necessary, they are also clear that it is insufficient.... Taking an integrated look across

policy fields is an important part of any honest assessment. This is because of the knock-on effects from the security shift that quickly became apparent regarding energy and climate, as well as economic and trade policy and attitudes to technological change, which all affect German competitiveness.” For all that, he concludes, Germany “needs a vision first.”

The Action Group Zeitenwende head also signed an open letter in March titled, “Chancellor Scholz Must Change Course and Support Ukraine to Win.” The letter can be taken as a sign of frustration with the German leader. In Scholz’s Bundestag appearance before departing for the March 21–22 European Council summit in Brussels, he still insisted that it would be “irresponsible” to send German Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine. Scholz said the only way to deliver the missiles would be with

German staff in support, which he called “out of the question.”

MESSAGES FROM MUNICH

“The stench of appeasement hung over the [2024] Munich Security Conference ... leaving more than a few European leaders making comparisons to September 1938,” wrote Frederick Kempe, head of the Atlantic Council. “It was then that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, meeting with Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and their French Republican and Italian fascist counterparts, signed off on the Third Reich’s annexation of the Western part of Czechoslovakia ... naively hoping that would allow them to avoid a larger European war.”

Kempe, the long-time editor of *Wall Street Journal Europe*, offered

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a warning for the Republicans blocking any further military support for Ukraine in order to get their candidate Trump elected: “[I]t’s worth reflecting on the dynamics behind the 1938 Munich Agreement and Chamberlain’s subsequent ‘Peace for Our Time’ speech, as they may hold lessons for U.S. lawmakers in the House of Representatives who continue to balk at approving urgently needed support for Ukraine.”

U.S. AID SO FAR

Those attending the Munich Security Conference in February could also catch the press conference of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a German research institute, which has an expert team working on the Ukraine Support Tracker cataloging the military, financial, and humanitarian aid governments have promised Ukraine.

Under the direction of Christoph Trebesch, the team from Kiel presented a new update on “allocations” by foreign governments for war-torn Ukraine.

Before going into that new update from Kiel, it would be useful to briefly look at what the U.S. government has supplied to Ukraine so far. For this an article by Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow from the Council on Foreign Relations “How Much Aid has the U.S. Sent to Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts” is very helpful.

Since the Russians invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration and the U.S. Congress have directed about \$75 billion in assistance to Ukraine. The military portion is put at \$46.3 billion.

[Shortly before this issue went to press, Congress passed and President Biden signed a new aid package that included \$60 billion for Ukraine. A majority of Republicans in the House voted against the package, but it passed with bipartisan support.]

As Masters and Merrow point out, “The historic sums are helping a broad set of Ukrainian people and institutions, including refugees, law enforcement, and independent radio broadcasters, though most of the aid has been military-related.” The article’s impressive list of support includes U.S. security assistance beginning in 2020, even before the Russian invasion.

EUROPE HAS TO DO MORE

The Ukraine Support Tracker in February made the point that “Europe has a long way to go to replace U.S. aid,” and emphasized the large gap between EU commitments and allocations. They report that “total European aid has long overtaken U.S. aid—not only in terms of commitments, but also in terms of specific aid allocations sent to Ukraine.” The approval by the EU Council of the

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€50 billion Ukraine support facility to be implemented over the 2024–2027 period was important. However, the gap between EU commitments and allocations remains very large—€144 billion committed versus €77 billion allocated. “Allocations” refers to aid that is actually arriving in Ukraine.

“To fully replace U.S. military assistance in 2024, Europe would have to double its current level and pace of arms assistance,” according to Ukraine Support Tracker. As a warning signal, the team points out

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that “newly committed military aid is just under €10 billion,” and that aid “continues to be driven by a few big donors, such as the Nordic countries, Germany, or the U.K.”

The largest European military donor is Germany, with €17.7 billion since February 2022, of which €9.4 billion has been allocated.

BUNDESWEHR’S BITTER REALITY

The negative standing of the present German government coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals doesn’t come as a surprise. The German chancellor’s historic 2022 *Zeitenwende* speech and the bitter reality that it has not had much impact were covered in *TIE*’s “Letter from Berlin” (Winter 2023).

As pointed out recently in *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, “The debate about whether or not to deliver Western-made main battle tanks to Ukraine lasted from April 2022 to January 2023—that is emblematic of Berlin’s current indecisiveness: Germany still has a hard time not only taking the lead, but also making up its mind, thereby making it difficult for partners to support German policies as well as to make their own choices. ... A long-term systematic plan for military and industrial support seems to be lacking, one from which German actions could be derived and justified. Military support appears to be guided by what is politically acceptable in Germany, rather than by what Ukraine



Boris Pistorius

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—K. Engelen

needs to achieve its goal of liberating its own territory.”

Major and Mölling point out that “the operational readiness of the Bundeswehr remains critical, as revealed by the problems regarding the Puma infantry fighting vehicle at the end of 2022.” The experts hope for better. “That is not surprising twelve months into a transformation process; reforms take time.” But they warn: “What is surprising, however, is that there doesn’t even seem to be a rudimentary plan to fix the situation.”

Some extensive *Der Spiegel* stories on the magazine’s international website help show what is wrong with the Bundeswehr, such as January 2023’s “Bad News Bundeswehr: An Examination of the Truly Dire State of Germany’s Military,” and more recently “Trump’s NATO Comments Trigger Defense Debate in Europe” (February 2024).

They offer a frightening inside analysis of Germany’s and Europe’s future security exposure in view of the Russian military and nuclear threats, and the uncertainty over whether a future Trump administration will keep the United States and the protection of its nuclear umbrella in NATO.

“A PARTY IN A DEATH SPIRAL”

For the embattled Scholz, after the resignation of the controversial

Christine Lambrecht as defense minister and under pressure from the still-smoldering controversy about whether to send long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine, appointing Boris Pistorius, the former interior minister of Lower Saxony, to replace Lambrecht turned out to be a piece of luck.

“With his experience, competence, and assertiveness, as well as his big heart, he is exactly the right person for the Bundeswehr in this turning of the times,” said the chancellor in his introduction.

Pistorius, a lawyer from Osnabrück, joined the center-left Social Democratic Party at the age of sixteen. He is praised for modernizing Lower Saxony’s police force. Like most German defense ministers before him, he had no military experience. As *Deutsche Welle* noted at the time, “Pistorius has a markedly different personality to Olaf Scholz. He is vociferous and favors directness in public statements.”

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After a year in office, the German mass circulation tabloid *Bild am*

Sonntag ran the headline in December 2023: “Defense Minister Pistorius rated most popular politician.”

But *The Economist* in February 2024 reminded readers how much the Social Democratic chancellor was under pressure with the headline, “A party in a death spiral? A mounting crisis of confidence confronts Olaf Scholz.” The article noted that polls now put the SPD in third or even fourth place, barely attracting 15 percent support. “The SPD looks likely to be humiliated in European elections in June, then trounced in September in elections in three eastern German states, where hostility to Mr. Scholz’s government seethes.”

As *The Economist* points out, Scholz’s “approval rating has since fallen to 20 percent, the lowest for any chancellor since the pollster Deutschlandtrend started keeping a record in 1997.”

What about bringing in the far more popular Pistorius as chancellor in a fresh national midterm election?

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For *The Economist*, that “would boost the party’s chances by just three percentage points. The spiral looks likely to continue.”

DIVIDED EUROPE

“Like in the Iraq War twenty years ago, divisions over how to support Ukraine militarily now threaten to become a more permanent rupture in European foreign policy,” argues *Eurointelligence* in Brussels. “Back

then, France and Germany split with the U.K. Now the French and British are supplying Scalp and Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine but the Germans reject coming to help Ukraine with their urgently needed long-range Taurus missiles because Chancellor Scholz thinks that only German military specialists on the battlefield are capable of targeting the missiles that could easily reach Moscow.”

Recent leaks from the German ministry of defense made a bad situation worse, damaging the fragile trust between the Western allies.

What happened was an intelligence disaster for the German military and government. The Russians were able to air a meeting of the four top German air force officers discussing the targeting requirements for the Taurus system, revealing how the British and French have been handling this with their specialists on the Ukraine battlefield.

Part of the discussion was whether the German military, in their hesitation to have German soldiers in Ukraine, could give some of the Taurus targeting job to British or French military already present there. To have the presence of British and French military personnel on the Ukrainian battlefield revealed was part of the intelligence disaster. “What the Russian leak demonstrates is that they see Olaf Scholz as the weak link in the western alliance,” was the damaging conclusion of *Eurointelligence*.

BUNDESTAG SPD LEADER CHANGES THE DEBATE

In the Bundestag’s March 15, 2024, session, Rolf Mützenich, the parliamentary group leader of the SPD’s 207 party members in the lower house, asked the question that changed the debate about the war in Ukraine not only in Germany. “Isn’t

it time that we not only talk about how to wage war but also think about how we can freeze the war and later end it?” he asked.

The headline from *Eurointelligence*, “SPD now openly supports partition of Ukraine,” may have gone too far, but the question coming from the lead party in the traffic-light coalition exposed the deep cracks and stresses of a government confronted with the first war on the European continent since World War II.

For the Brussels observers, the Mützenich call for freezing the war in Ukraine doesn’t come as a surprise. They argue, “On domestic policy, the SPD and the Greens have a large degree of overlap, but they are at the very opposite ends over Ukraine. ... The German government is now actively pursuing a freezing of the conflict around current battle lines, or whatever battle lines will ultimately emerge. Even freezing the conflict on the basis of current battle lines would require more military supplies because Vladimir Putin is not willing to settle.”

DRAMATIC AUSTERITY AHEAD

Apart from the political turmoil from the war in Ukraine, Chancellor Scholz and his coalition will face the full brunt of spending constraints imposed by the end of the debt brake suspension in the 2025 budget. Germany’s 2025 budget “will include an unprecedented amount of austerity—around 1 percent GDP—coming at the tail of a cyclical and structural slump” warns *Eurointelligence*. “Germany’s absolutism on the debt brake has two overriding effects, one political, one economic. It will kill the coalition. And it will kill investment and growth. ... The biggest fiscal red line of the current government is not investment but social transfers. The more political red lines you

impose, the more investment will be squeezed.”

No wonder Friedrich Merz, the opposition leader of the center-right CDU/CSU who organized the challenge before the German Constitutional Court to the ruling coalition’s reallocation of €60 billion in off-budget covid funds, is now

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predicting an early end for the Scholz government. Christian Lindner, finance minister and FDP party head, is a strong supporter of the *Schuldenbremse*, blocking any move to get even a constitutionally possible partial debt brake suspension, for instance for the urgently needed military defense build-up. As noted in the previous “Letter from Berlin,” Merz wants to use the budget chaos to replace the traffic-light coalition as quickly as possible.

Now Merz is even predicting a premature end of the Scholz coalition government because Lindner’s FDP will leave the present traffic-light coalition early to make sure that the FDP Liberals, in the coming German federal elections in October 2025, will stay in the Bundestag.

Merz, on the lookout for possible coalition partners, recently praised the Greens for having been critical of Putin’s Russia all along and for their willingness to deliver German Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine in order to hit the Russian supply lines for weapons and new troops. ◆