

Opinion – The Effect of Germany’s *Zeitenwende* on Exports and Soft Power

Written by Alex Braun

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For years, Germany has positioned itself on the international stage as a calming influence, less predisposed to retort to aggressive tactics, economic or other, when dealing with totalitarian regimes or populist mavericks. Germany’s approach to geopolitics has been fundamentally economic, *Wandel durch Handel*, or the reduction of political tensions through trade and commercial enterprise. Establishing industrial supply chains across Asia, securing cheap energy like Russian gas, and tight budgetary control at home have all formed Germany’s holistic approach to foreign policy, notwithstanding strategic dependencies on China and Russia designed to maintain a fragile status quo. But now, geopolitical crises have ushered in a change in German strategic thinking. Chancellor Scholz has called it a *Zeitenwende*, which “goes beyond the war in Ukraine and beyond the issue of European security”. He asks a central question: “How can we, as Europeans and as the European Union, remain independent actors in an increasingly multipolar world?”.

For Germany, this strategic transformation has primarily manifested itself in the military sphere, where changes are on the horizon, and in the promotion of progressive values held dear by the German public, a component of German global influence that has for years left many feeling conflicted due to the country’s *laissez-faire* approach to authoritarian regimes, especially Russia. “I’m glad that we’re finally debating foreign and security policy in depth – until now, that was more the case in Germany with labor-market or social policy,” commented Social Democrat Michael Roth, the chair of the Bundestag’s foreign affairs committee, to POLITICO.

Moreover, despite the current energy crisis, the German economy has just about weathered the storm, and the country can still rely on its exports for sustainable support. Its trade balance remains in the black and in a relatively healthy state compared to some of its European partners. Even if this situation is primarily due to low imports, this indicates that the national economy’s fundamental situation is not as terrible as many doomsayers claim. To gain real influence, many believe that it is essential to leverage exports to promote the broader values, in which the majority of the German public place real importance, as they believe they are intrinsically linked to the German economic model and the standard of living Germany has achieved since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This approach is gradually gaining ground, influencing German companies through a rethinking of legal norms and standards.

The propagation of Germany’s new approach to global geopolitics and modified export model is really a result of the end of what can be called Germany’s triple dividend, namely an until-recently-stable tripod of geopolitical reliance that has ensured the country’s economic stability for years: U.S. security, the economic growth of China, and cheap Russian gas. This model has allowed Germany to underinvest in its military, boost its economy, and expand its market power.

Chancellor Scholz’s *Zeitenwende* speech on February 27, 2023, was meant to herald a new dawn in German security and defence policy. A few months on, and many commentators have remarked that progress has been slow. Scholz immediately halted the certification of the Nord Stream 2 project after Russia invaded Ukraine, but has lacked the initiative to help Germany become what Social Democratic Party (SPD) co-leader Lars Klingbeil recently called a global *Führungsmacht* (leading power).

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Indeed, Germany’s entire *Wandel durch Handel* foreign and trade policy strategy has been under the microscope since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including analyses of the policies and actions of former Chancellor Angela Merkel and especially former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, whose deep ties to Russia have been widely reported. In fact, the last 30 years of German foreign, security and trade policies are being called into question. “Much too much dialogue and much too little hardball with the Kremlin,” wrote Ukraine’s ambassador to Germany, Andriy Melnyk, in *Tagesspiegel*.

Indeed, Germany’s armament of Ukraine, a reversal of its policy not to supply arms to parties involved in a conflict, has been one of the most obvious results of Scholz’s *Zeitenwende*. The subject of German “values” is also beginning to find its way into certain burning issues, such as relations and dealings with Turkey and Israel (Germany’s exports to Israel have been surging since the October 7th massacre by Hamas). Indeed, the delicate issue of Israel and relations between Turkey and the US-led NATO alliance recently led Scholz to block a request from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for a purchase of Eurofighter Typhoon jets. Turkey’s reluctance to denounce Hamas and Erdogan’s declaration of Israel as a “terrorist state” have led to the impasse. Nonetheless, many members of the political class have been calling for a more tenacious approach to the export of military arms and a new approach to dealing with states deemed too disinterested in values of diversity, human rights and inclusion. These growing calls from the left have begun slowly to make their mark on German export policy. But doubts remain about the veracity of the German government’s intentions.

Even before Scholz’s *Zeitenwende* speech, Germany has been leading the way in global attempts to encourage inclusion and diversity, notably for the LGBTQ+ community, in places where members of the community are still persecuted or lack protection in state law. Back in 2021, the German government launched a new policy aimed at championing LGBTQ+ rights abroad called the LGBTI Inclusion Strategy. The policy commits German diplomatic missions to do more to help activists and engage in dialogue in host countries where the LGBTQ+ community is still marginalised.

“The German government’s important policy comes at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the discrimination that many LGBTI people experience around the world,” said Cristian González Cabrera, LGBT rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The policy’s focus on strengthening civil society organisations recognises the crucial role they play as front-line human rights defenders and the violence and harassment they face for their pro-LGBTI work.” The problem facing the German government thus far in its efforts to champion such causes has been aforementioned economic policies that have left it relying on things like cheap Russian gas. Indeed, the German government has been courting other states whose treatment of such marginalised groups has been more than suspect in efforts to plug its energy whole left wide open by its move away from Russia.

In this context, a delegation of German parliamentarians visited Qatar and Saudi Arabia in the autumn of 2022 to address human rights, football, and energy issues. The delegation, led by Christoph Ploß (CDU/CSU), Chairman of the Parliamentary Group for Arabic-speaking Countries in the Middle East, sought to explore the impact of the football World Cup on the development of countries like Qatar and the potential for improving human rights and social standards. During the visit, Christian Ploß emphasised the delegation’s support for the German government’s efforts to establish energy partnerships, especially with Qatar, following Russia’s absence as a gas supplier. The discussions in the growing economic hub of Jeddah focused on the potential for economic collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Germany, including cooperation in the energy sector. But, these actions have been described as “hypocritical” by the Qatari Foreign Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, pointing out that German criticisms of Qatar’s human rights records seemed somewhat duplicitous at a time when the German government was in direct negotiations with Qatar and Saudi Arabia as it sought new sources of cheap energy.

So, the reality of the *Zeitenwende* is being closely scrutinised by the political parties. A year after the February 2022 speech, Jens Spahn, CDU deputy chair in the Bundestag, deplored the fact that the federal government “no longer maintained the flight altitude” of this ambition. Voices on the left of German politics, meanwhile, will be expecting a more proactive, cogent approach to issues of moral importance to the German public, and less sanctimonious preaching of values when concrete actions fail to follow. Many point to EU laws that protect minority groups as a platform. Klaus Jetz, the Managing Director of the Lesbian and Gay Association Germany (LSVD) and the Hirschfeld-

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Eddy Foundation, a foundation for the human rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people underlines: “We have a contractually guaranteed minority protection and human rights standards. We need to repeatedly remind these politicians of that.”

About the author:

Alex Braun is an an engineer by training. He has worked on industrial export projects for major German companies, before developing skills in commercial strategies for sensitive industries.