



German Strategic Policy after the Cold War (1991-2017)

Zulqarnain*

Siraj Ahmed Nizamani**

Dure Shehwar***

Abstract

German Strategic Policy (1991-2017) changed because of several factors, which included the assertive behaviour of Russia, incoming refugees, the threat of terrorism, Brexit, the waning interests of the United States in Europe, and escalating climate change problems. The German Strategic Policy that spanned over two decades focused on developing and modernizing military hardware. This requirement in fact can be observed by analysing the recent shifts in German policies and politics at large. These shifts are largely based on the German strong economy based on free trade and policies of economic development. Many scholars argue a facet of economic strength is reflected in military power. This paper analyses German defence policy change and discusses factors that led to changes in German strategic position in the EU as a strong military power.

Keywords: German Strategic Policy, European Security, German Defence Centric Policy, National Security

Introduction

After two of the most destructive world wars in human history, Germany knelt on its knees, humiliated and punished, while many states in Europe experienced a culture of cooperation and peace. Germany remained a victim of a power struggle between the two superpowers during the Cold War and only after the defeat of the Soviet Union, it got the chance to share peace in

* Mr. Zulqarnain is an Independent Research Scholar on Environment and Security. Previously, he served as a Research Associate at the University of Gujrat. Email: zulniz@hotmail.com.

** Mr. Siraj Ahmed Nizamani is an Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Sindh, Jamshoro. Email: siraj_1@yahoo.com.

***Ms. Dure Shehwar has Graduated from the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Gujrat. Email: dureshehwar2002@gmail.com.

Europe and shape its policies with a greater degree of freedom. This essay examines and analyses the strategic and security policies of Germany after the Cold War.

Background

The historical analysis of Germany entails the volatile and rocky past as compared to the prosperity of today. Before 1990, the foreign policy of Germany had two polar points of reference that could resuscitate the country in the world community; the past which needed overcoming and a future to look forward to. Past, Germany envisioned, could be addressed with a commitment to principles of morality, human dignity, rule of law, democracy, and an order of universal norms so that national unity could be forged, as the imminent threat from the Communist/East loomed during the Cold War. And a future that could erect an international alliance, the way Europe had done by becoming part of the United Nations (UN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU). The misery of Germany continued during the Cold War, and its influential foreign policy did not surface till the fall of the Berlin Wall. At this time, people began to think that change was inevitable. With the integration of the EU in 1993, Germany became a core member state that asserted a decisive role in the EU's policymaking. It played an important part in the process of deepening and widening the EU.¹ The newly unified Germany found its security in multilateralism, which focused on elevating itself as a stronger power with a stronger economy. Networking in various ways, it identified the importance of a free and open market and peaceful order, factors which lead to a strong policy benefitting them in the Union and around the globe. Germany rose to become one of the strongest European nations along with Britain and France.²

Becoming a prominent member of the Union, Germany showed strong dissent against nuclear weapons and supported a non-proliferation regime but contributed to maintaining peace and security in the region and outside clarifying its military role in European and global security. Germany pushed for Social Democratic–Green Government support for NATO when

¹ James McBride and Jeanne Park. "After the Berlin Wall", (January 6, 2022), visit <https://www.cfr.org/article/after-berlin-wall-europes-struggle-overcome-its-divisions>.

² Ibid.

intervention in Kosovo took place in 1999.³ Germany's military contributions since then have fluctuated from strong support for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan during the 2000s to its abstention from the UN Security Council resolution preceding military intervention by NATO in Libya.⁴

Shifting Strategic Environment

Upholding liberalist traditions in Germany met with academic opposition as early as 1990 questioning liberal traditions and their counterproductivity in the long run. Scholarly oppositions of the realists held that Germany was bound by its past with active military character. Mearsheimer was one of the most vocal academics of the time and predicted a misbalance in Europe after the Cold War. He suggested balance of power vis-à-vis Russia, would entail having an optimal number of nuclear weapons. In addition, he proposed the disintegration of NATO and dismemberment of the European Union.⁵ These recommendations were rooted in the neo-realist paradigm, which asserted that Germany should acquire power to ensure their survival and security in national interests as many other European states have done in the past. Unlike liberals, realists emphasized the inevitability of conflict and pushed for the acquisition of military power to ensure security. To many experts, these ideas were far from reality back then, but recent unfolding events speak volumes of this foresight.

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014 by Russia, President Vladimir Putin announced to induct of 46 intercontinental ballistic missiles in 2015 to upgrade the Russian offensive drive. To add to that UK's exit from the Union (Brexit) brought a marked change in the security of the Union, leaving Germany in a crucial position that highlighted the perception of its dominant role in the EU.⁶ It was clear to many that Germany had to be concerned with the security at the Eastern fronts. In addition, globalization has decentralized

³ Wolfgang-Uwe Friedrich (ed.). *The Legacy of Kosovo: German Politics and Policies in the Balkans*, (AICGS, 2000). Available at https://aicgs.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/legacy_of_kosovo.pdf.

⁴ Daniel Flesmes and Hannes Ebert. "The Contested Use of Force in Germany's New Foreign Policy", (9 September 2016) at <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/09/09/the-contested-use-of-force-in-germanys-new-foreign-policy/>.

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer. "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15(1) (1990): 5–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538981>.

⁶ See John Ryan's blog at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/04/07/brexit-has-complicated-and-isolated-germanys-role-in-the-eu/>.

militant terrorism and violence. War had entered its fourth generation, and cyberspace was playing a key role in organized violence, bleeding the sovereignty of many European states. The global economic crisis of 2008 also showed that the integration of national economies did not guarantee financial stability and the financial crisis in Europe showed, that national economies were not safe anyway. In addition, climate change, changes in demographics, uncontrolled migration, resource and food shortages, pandemics, as well as weak and failing states put pressure on Germany. Having advocated free and open trade, order and cultural exchange, Germany was facing the brunt of the new challenges that had gradually grown and demanded changes in policy paradigms for the country.

What hurt European interests the most was the American elections of 2016 that brought Donald Trump into power.⁷ Trump reiterated American supremacy and statism standing true to realist traditions, and voiced anti-liberal policies such as closing borders, and racial and religious discrimination. Trump added, that America was not responsible for European defence,⁸ calling NATO obsolete. The multilateral agreements under Trump also came under strong criticism, he voiced anti-globalization views, directly in contradiction with the European stance raising German economic concerns mentioned above. What came as an alarm to Europe and specifically to Germany was Trump's inclination toward Russia. The European lawmakers were concerned that Trump's America and Putin's Russia could collude to strike a "grand bargain" which would not consider European interests; a step that would influence the EU's future.⁹ The news regarding Russian meddling in the 2016 elections in Trump's favour generated new concerns in the courts of the EU about the uncertain future of Trump's presidency. With Britain leaving the union, Germany had to become a major player in shaping policies to strengthen the Union and itself.

⁷ Dina Shapiro and Jeremy Pardijs. "The Transatlantic Meaning of Donald Trump: A US-EU Power Audit," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 21, 2017, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_transatlantic_meaning_of_donald_trump_a_us_eu_power_audit7229/.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Max Fisher. "Fearing U.S. Withdrawal, Europe Considers Its Own Nuclear Deterrent," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/world/europe/european-union-nuclear-weapons.html?smid=url-share>.

German Domestic Politics

Mass public support that led to winning her fourth election, Chancellor Angela Merkel indicated her inclination towards building a monetarily strong Germany which implied a stronger state that could defend and provide security to its boundaries. A different but stronger signal for strengthening German defence was revealed in the September 2017 elections when the right-wing party (Alternate for Germany, AfD) became the third largest party in the country tracing its roots to historic German nationalist agenda with strong nationalist ideals. With AfD becoming strong, pro-Nazi political groups started becoming strong, and the party opposed Merkel's stance on refugees and felt apathetic toward a strong EU.

Steps to build Germany as a strong economic state inherently meant defence and security needed building. Mearsheimer argues economic strength is a latent indicator of the overall power of a country including its defence and security.¹⁰ The economic might can be conveniently converted to active military might at any time. Technology that advances industry for economic development can be used for primary national interests and power,¹¹ such as sophisticated military hardware.

German Strategic Policy

The German president, the defence and the foreign ministers, in early 2014 believed, Germany should take greater responsibility for international security, implying that Berlin should militarily contribute more to this security.¹² Germany used diplomatic channels with Russia over the Ukraine crisis, but when the Crimean Peninsula was annexed by Russia in March 2014, Germany took a firm stance on sanctions with Russia condemning its move in the Baltics as a breach of international law. This was augmented by President Barack Obama early in 2016 when he visited Europe and supported Merkel's concerns about political and economic strife in Europe, and Germany's duty to take on a more active leadership role in turbulent times. Merkel later advocated European unity for greater security, e.g., in NATO and G7 summits (May 2017), Merkel argued, "The times in which we can fully count on others are somewhat over, as I have experienced in the past few days (...) we Europeans must take our destiny into our own

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Chicago: Norton, 2001), 55.

¹¹ Hans J. Morgenthau. *Politics Among Nations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1964).

¹² Daniel Keohane. "A Greater Military Role for Germany?" *Carnegie Europe*, (June 7, 2016), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/63741>.

hands".¹³ In addition to that, a special sub-committee within the budget committee in the German parliament approved, away from public scrutiny, the budget for more intelligence facilities to aid the military. German newspapers cited a document from within the office of the Chancellor arguing that *The Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND) or the Federal Intelligence Service, "needs to be able to gather information quickly and autonomously to be able to offer the most independent and up-to-date situation assessments possible." The document added that it was not "adequate to generate information while being dependent on third parties, to buy visual material on the commercial market or to make requests of international partners".¹⁴

In the past Germany had not carried out many military operations with the UN or NATO, as France had, however, Germany had deployed troops in Afghanistan, Mali, and Lithuania, leading military missions for NATO. And Germany supported NATO with their four new NATO battalions defending the Eastern European sectors when Crimea was invaded, participating in collective security actions.¹⁵ After the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Germany send a frigate and a reconnaissance aircraft to support France, and the anti-Islamic State coalition in Iraq and Syria (having already sent weapons to the Kurdish peshmerga in Iraq and Patriot missiles to Turkey under NATO).

In 2016, the new defence white paper indicated German commitment to an increased role in defence; Germany was ready and willing to boost its military role on the world stage.¹⁶ It was reported that Berlin would increase its defence budget from €34.3 to €39.2 bn (\$39-44.6 bn) by 2020 and planned to invest some €130 bn (\$148 bn) in defence infrastructure and equipment by 2030, and number in its armed forces.¹⁷ All of this would have

¹³ "Angela Merkel: Europe must take 'our fate' into own hands", *Politico* (May 2017), at <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-europe-cdu-must-take-its-fate-into-its-own-hands-elections-2017/>.

¹⁴ "German Intelligence Agency Gets Spy Satellite Funds", *DW*, 6 November 2017.

¹⁵ Daniel Keohane. "A Greater military Role for Germany?"

¹⁶ Heiko Diehl. "The German White Paper 2016: Changing Strategic Culture?" *School of Advanced Military Studies US Army Command and General Staff College*, 2018. <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/api/collection/p4013coll3/id/3822/download>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

been unthinkable a few years ago.¹⁸ A consortium of newspapers also reported German government would spend €400 mm (\$465 mm) to assist the construction of up to three spy satellites (nicknamed: Georg) for the BND,¹⁹ which could be launched into space by the early 2020s. Although Germany spends less than 1.2% of their GDP on defence which is far below (the 2% of GDP) required by NATO to meet defence goals, Germany is currently the third largest spender in NATO.²⁰ Merkel committed to raise defence spending from 1.2% of GDP to the NATO target of 2% - a difference of some €25bn (\$30bn) a year by 2024. In addition, Germany has strongly pushed European states for pooling and sharing of capability efforts for NATO since 2013, with their *Framework Nations Concept* proposal. To demonstrate their rhetoric Germany is integrating a Dutch brigade in the German 1st Armoured Division and placing a German battalion under a Polish brigade. As early as 2002, Germany and France had announced that the *European Security and Defence Policy* (ESDP) would be turned into a security and defence organization; and since the summer of 2016, Germany and France have been persuading European states to closer cooperation on defence policies and internal security of EU. Both countries acknowledge *Europe of different speeds*, i.e., different states in the EU work for such policies at their speed. Keeping integration flexible, such as enhanced cooperation, permanent structured cooperation, and constructive abstentions²¹ many European countries are now ardent contributors to organizations like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

Building regional security and deterrence is a new line of thinking in Germany very different from a belief that voiced nuclear-free Europe. The EU has been considering the acquisition of nuclear weapons of its own, and the discussion on *Euro-deterrent* has become vocal, especially in Germany, which was a crusader against nuclear proliferation previously.²² Germany

¹⁸ Cynthia Kroet. "Refugee Crises Cost Germany over €21.3 billion in 2016," *Politico*, (January 27, 2017), <https://www.politico.eu/article/refugee-crisis-cost-germany-over-e20-billion-in-2016/>.

¹⁹ Jefferson Chase. "German Intelligence Agency gets Spy Satellite Funds," *DW*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-intelligence-agency-gets-spy-satellite-system-funds/a-41244180>.

²⁰ "NATO Spending by Country," *Wisevoter* (2023), <https://shorturl.at/bAMN5>.

²¹ Annegret Bendiek. "A Paradigm Shift in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy: From Transformation to Resilience," *SWP Research Papers* No. 11 (2017), <https://ideas.repec.org/p/zbw/swprps/rp112017.html>.

²² Max Fisher. "Fearing U.S. Withdrawal, Europe Considers Its Own Nuclear Deterrent."

seeks a British-French nuclear program and the German Parliament believes, “Britain and France could legally base nuclear warheads on German soil” with Germany having partial control of the weapons through a “dual key” system, an arrangement that currently deploys American warheads.²³ *The Scientific Services of the German Bundestag* commissioned by the German Parliament, assessed intricacies related to international obligations regarding Nuclear Weapon Proliferation for Germany and concluded Germany could participate in the region’s nuclear program without violating international obligations.²⁴ Defence spending of 1.4% (GDP) in 2000, Germany has increased the budget to 4.2% (2016) and expects to increase it further by 8.0%.²⁵ The hike in the budget is partly because of Brexit when UK contributions (20%) to European security waned. In given circumstances inclination of Germany toward building a stronger security will have important implications at various levels in the EU. These will bring benefits to Germany and others but with accompanying challenges.

German Defence Centric Policies: Benefits and Challenges

Many structural and other measures taken by Germany to enhance the security of the state and the Union should dampen many public and opposition concerns, like guarding the borderless Schengen zone, refugee influx and terrorist threats. However, public opinion in German democracy matters greatly and will have to be taken into account; for example, regarding the Franco-German lead role, 13% of the parliament votes were not in favour of an active German military role. France showed concerns over such public views and wanted Germany to resolve such differences before moving on. This means the German government not only needs to muster greater public support it also needs to appease opposition (AfD) that favours strong security and military prowess. In addition, greater defence spending would imply a greater lift in the economy, which would translate into greater economic activity and human resource engagement for defence policies to work and security to reign.

²³ Ulrich Kühn, Tristan Volpe and Bert Thompson. “Tracking the German Nuclear Debate,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 15, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/15/tracking-german-nuclear-debate-pub-72884>.

²⁴ Max Fisher. “European Nuclear Weapons Program Would Be Legal, German Review Finds,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/world/europe/germany-nuclear-weapons.html>.

²⁵ Elisabeth Braw. “Germany is Quietly Building a European Army under its Command,” *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/22/germany-is-quietly-building-a-european-army-under-its-command/>.

Germany's efforts to build stronger defence will benefit the Union and make it more resilient vis-a-vis any threat from the East; will act as a force to keep the expansionist intentions of Russia in check. This was especially important at a time when the US chose to slip away from guarding Europe for its threats. If Germany succeeds in becoming a participatory nuclear power, it will benefit Europe as a strong deterrent against unnecessary meddling of the US in European and German internal affairs. It will also reduce the EU's dependence on the US for the protection of its sovereignty. Better financial stature for Germany would mean better handling of the Schengen zone, refugee crisis and terrorism. Germany will have a greater influence on the Union members, like opposing Turkey's demand for EU membership.²⁶ Additionally, Germany will have a greater capability to engage in countering the international terrorism scourge. Strong trade engagements will boost the European economy which will help the EU to stand firm and remain one of the world's largest economies. This will counter the cold attitudes of the United States and England which have distanced themselves from Europe.

Nevertheless, Germany would face a challenge in the region that stems from its hegemonic and aggressive history.²⁷ As the structure of the world changed after the Second World War, nuclear weapons took the lead in shaping the power configuration of countries. Germany with its nuclear arsenal would raise fear among other smaller European countries, and gaining their confidence would be a great challenge.

Conclusion

German centrality to Europe is quite obvious. Its socio-political resources cannot be ignored contemporary issues facing the European polity need to be addressed. Leading European military powers, Britain, and France are stretched out for their operational, budgetary, and capability resources; and no other country can offer nearly the same level of military resources, except Germany. After Brexit, it is now up to Germany and France to share the massive task of defending the continental states especially smaller members of the EU. However, some sceptics maintain that it will not be easy for Germany to assume such a role and regain the character of a major influential power in the region. Even with its large defence budget, Germany

²⁶ "German Opposition to Turkey's EU Membership Rises: Poll", *Reuters*, 27 May 2014.

²⁷ Ulrich Kühn and Tristan Volpe. "Keine Atombombe, Bitte. Why Germany Should Not Go Nuclear," *Foreign Affairs*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/keine-atombombe-bitte>.

lacks adequate military capabilities. The German defence ombudsman (January 2016) said that the country has a shortage of usable military aircraft,²⁸ only 38 operational fighter jets from a stock of 114. And it would take at least 15 years to bring the Air Force up to par with a strong Air Force. Other EU states should not expect too much from German armed forces or its current defence policy soon.

However, others believe the new military ambition in Germany is a welcome change for the EU. A stronger German defence policy can contribute to European security despite facing difficulties due to domestic politics. Merkel during 2016-17 realized defence budget cuts were wrong and had to be reversed to start developing a strong military. If Germany wants to preserve and protect its way of life, it must work for a peaceful and rule-based world order, but at the same time employ all legitimate means, including military force for its protection and sovereignty. Germany in future will have to undertake greater efforts than ever to adapt regional and global governance structures to address new challenges. But it can only do this together with others. The country is deeply integrated in mutual dependence on multilateral commitments with other agencies (UN, EU, and NATO), which can only mean working towards common goals with others, and for others. Germany will not only be a leader in the Union but a strong economic and military power on the world map.

²⁸ "German Army is 'Short of Almost Everything,'" *DW*, January 26, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/ombudsman-german-army-is-short-of-almost-everything/a-19005841>.