

Germany and the Ukraine Crisis: End of the Age of Illusions

Shimon Stein | No. 1568 | March 13, 2022

There seems to be no country in Europe where the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused a greater systemic upheaval than in Germany. The invasion roused Germany from the illusions that have guided its dealings with Russia since the 1970s – the “Ostpolitik” (eastern) policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the unification of Germany, and the (apparent) disappearance of the Soviet threat created a sense of the end of history and the victory of the liberal West. Enjoyment of the “fruits of peace” became the motto of German policy, bringing with it dependence on Russia, the United States, and China. Without the invasion of Ukraine it is doubtful whether Germany would have taken the decision to bring about a paradigm shift in its security, arms exports, and energy policies. While this shift was announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in a speech at the Bundestag, it remains to be seen whether his determination will translate into action and be implemented over the long term.

There seems to be no country in Europe where the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused, in a short time, a more widespread systemic upheaval than in Germany. This change can be seen as a wake-up call and a turning point marking the end of the age of naivete. Germany has been roused from the illusions that guided its conduct toward Russia in the thirty years since the end of the Cold War and the unification of Germany, and perhaps even since the 1970s. Two statements reflect the extent of German remorse for not doing enough in the past to respond to Vladimir Putin’s aggression, for which Germany is now paying the price, and for the many years of neglecting German defense - a consequence of underestimating the Russian threat. In a Tweet on February 24, 2022, the day the invasion began, the outgoing Minister of Defense Kramp Karrenbauer wrote: “I am very angry at us for our historical failure. After Georgia, Crimea, and Donbas, we didn’t prepare anything that could have deterred Putin.” In a reply to a journalist’s question about the readiness of the German army, the ground forces commander replied, “We are defenseless”

The reasons for this situation lie in the “Ostpolitik” (eastern) policy that was formulated and implemented in the 1970s by Chancellor Willy Brandt (the

“brains” behind Egon Bahr), and guided by the principles of “change through rapprochement” and “change through trade.” This meant that over time it would be possible to change the Cold War situation with central and eastern Europe as a whole, and with Russia in particular, through dialogue and trade with the Soviet leadership that would change the geopolitical reality. In other words, building military superiority over the Soviet Union was not the main priority of Social-Democrat policy in the 1970s and early 1980s. Evidence lies in the strong opposition from this party to the NATO resolution known as “the NATO double track decision” that called for a continuation of the dialogue with the Soviet Union, while simultaneously placing medium range nuclear weapons in Europe. This opposition brought down (Social Democrat) Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and led to the establishment of a government headed by the Christian Democrat Kohl, who passed the resolution. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the unification of Germany, and the ostensible disappearance of the Soviet threat were accompanied by a sense of the end of history and the victory of the liberal West. Enjoyment of the “fruits of peace” became the motto of German policy in particular, and of Europe in general. After all, gas and oil were flowing from Russia, NATO and the United States were protecting German security, and the Chinese market (along with other markets opening in central and eastern Europe) was bringing prosperity and economic benefit. Thus Germany found itself in a position of growing dependence on Russia, the United States, and China, a position in which it lived peacefully for the last thirty years. Indeed, Chancellor Angela Merkel met with Russian President Putin more often than with any Western leader; over the years she came to know him well and maintained a dialogue with him, although she had no illusions about him. The question therefore arises, would she have been able to prevent the invasion or to promote a ceasefire?

Be that as it may, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought Germany back to earth with a bang, and this hard landing, whose full consequences cannot yet be assessed, has already led to a paradigm shift in Germany's foreign, security, energy, and economic policies. Evidence of Germany's initial difficulty in absorbing the significance of the invasion can be seen not only in the refusal to supply Ukraine with defensive weapons, using the

excuse of its restrictive arms export policy and historical considerations (regarding Russia, while ignoring German history regarding Ukraine), and satisfying itself with the supply of 5000 helmets (a decision that was quickly mocked – the governor of Kyiv joked that the next decision would be to send cushions) – but also in its refusal to allow third countries to provide Ukraine with German-made weapons. Until after the invasion, Germany also refused to agree to the demand from its allies, led by the United States, to freeze the Nord Stream 2 gas project.

However, in a “historic” speech delivered in the Bundestag on February 27, Chancellor Scholz specified the immediate tasks facing his government in response to the crisis in Ukraine. In his opening remarks, he said that the Russian invasion marked a turning point in European history and that the threat following the invasion was not what it was previously. He added that Germany recognized the challenge Putin posed to the security of Europe.

The first task: Putin’s invasion of Ukraine created a new reality requiring a clear response – the supply of defensive weapons to Ukraine. This decision reflects a deviation, although not the first, from the long-maintained policy of not supplying weapons to areas marked by tension (for example, the supply of weapons to Israel).

The second task: in order to try to force Putin to change his course, the European Union decided on a package of sanctions and the removal of Russia from the SWIFT arrangement. It was Germany, together with Austria and Italy, that delayed the decision to eject Russia from the SWIFT system – a decision that does not cover the fields of energy and some other commodities, in order to avoid harming the economies of the United States and Europe that are dependent on Russian energy. But this contributes to the continuation of the Russian military effort, which is absurd in itself. In any case, the turnaround occurred under pressure and not entirely based on recognition of the need to learn lessons from the years of “naive” policy, as Chancellor Scholz called it.

The third task: stressing the commitment to NATO. Putin's aggression means that everything must be done to ensure peace and security. This commitment must be seen in the context of NATO decisions about increasing the security budget, a bone of contention between Germany and the United States.

The fourth task: Putin's challenge means that Germany must invest in its security. The army will be strengthened ("It is necessary for aircraft to fly, ships to sail, and soldiers to be well equipped") and a "special capital fund" will be established of 100 billion euros (to be included in the 2022 budget). In addition, the security budget will increase annually to a growth of 2 percent by 2024. As for the nuclear issue, a new fighter plane (apparently of American manufacture) will be purchased that will be able to carry nuclear weapons for positioning on German soil. Note that behind these budgetary decisions lie many years of continuous cutbacks in the security budget and the abolition of compulsory military service, which led the commander of the ground forces to declare that the army was unable to fulfill its declared functions.

The fifth task: in order to ensure a regular supply of energy, the sources of supply will be diversified and the transition to alternative energy will be accelerated. This is the context in which the decision (also taken under pressure) to freeze the Nord Stream 2 project should be seen. For many years German policymakers have done nothing to limit their dependence on Russia. Now, in the absence of alternative sources of supply and fears of the implications for the economy and "social peace," Germany has acted to remove the energy sector from the package of sanctions imposed on Russia.

In terms of its impact on Germany, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is similar to the terror attack on United States soil on September 11, 2001. The warning signs were known in both cases, and in both cases there was no willingness to take steps in order to try and prevent what happened. Once again, after the Ukrainian crisis the question will be asked: "What went wrong?" Why did Germany have to wait for a crisis in order to limit its

dependence on Russian energy? Why did Germany and the other members of the European Union as well as the United States not actually respond to the speech given by President Putin at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where he set out his thesis and his justifications for the invasion of Georgia (in 2008) and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (in 2014)? Clearly the responses had no significant cost for Putin and encouraged him to continue promoting his policy. Why was Germany lulled into thinking that the threats to its security had disappeared and therefore there was no need to allocate resources to protect itself? Was it President Donald Trump who roused Germany and the European Union from the delusion that the United States would continue bearing the burden of defending Europe, with no greater contribution on their part? Hopefully the crisis in Ukraine will encourage a meaningful reinforcement of the European element of NATO while building the military capabilities of the EU itself. As for the economic aspect, will the crisis encourage moves toward reducing German dependence on the Chinese market?

Now that the process of shedding illusions has begun and Germany has announced its determination to absorb the significance of the crisis in Ukraine and implement the resulting insights, it remains to be seen whether the rhetoric will be followed by action for the long run.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen