

Ukraine Will Be Decisive for the Western Alliance

May 16, 2022 By Jackson Janes

Germany is at a crossroads. But it shares that with other partners.

Russia's war against Ukraine has upended decades of thinking not only about Russia, but about Germany and its role in ensuring the peace and security of Europe. Chancellor Olaf Scholz addressed that in his speech last week to the nation, stressing that the most important lesson Germany learned from May 8 over 77 years ago was “never again” to war, genocide, and tyranny. Vladimir Putin's unprovoked war of aggression had led Scholz to declare on February 27 that the assumptions of post-Cold War dreams were no longer valid, and that it was now a new era requiring a reversal of Germany's stance toward Russia. “The invasion of Ukraine marks a turning point. It threatens our entire post-war order. In this situation, it is our duty to support Ukraine to the best of our ability in its defense against Vladimir Putin's invading army.”

Germany is central to the outcome of that confrontation.

It is Europe's largest economy, and it has long been a leader in the European Union. People there, in the United States, and indeed all over the world are watching how Germany responds.

The challenge has also sparked a painful debate inside Germany, largely over the question of war in a country that remains caught in a legacy that has left it hampered in dealing with the return of great-power politics on the global stage. There remains a strong sentiment of pacifism and an emphasis on achieving peace without weapons in German society. That struggle has also been marked by the government's lack of clarity in the past weeks, finding it exceedingly difficult to deliver heavy weapons to Ukraine and to cut off its dependence on Russian energy. Under increasing pressure at a donor conference on April 26, Germany finally permitted the shipment of armored anti-aircraft guns to help Ukraine defend itself. But the path of that decision was marked by hesitancy and caution, particularly with reference to the possibility of escalating the war into a nuclear nightmare.

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The fact is that despite these contributions, Europe and the United States expected more from Germany. The most important country in Europe ought to have the largest stake in sustaining the stability and security of the continent.

Almost all of Europe has concluded that Ukraine is fighting for the freedom of Europe, including that of Germany. A tragic misreading of how much things have changed in Europe since the invasion of Ukraine was mirrored in Putin's speech on May 9, in which he described Russia as being threatened with invasion by the West and equating his war with the battle against Nazi Germany in World War II. This was not a signal for dialogue, but for more aggression to come.

There is thus no going back to the past. Europe has been changed permanently, and Germany is confronted with a need not only to adjust to this new reality, but to lead as the largest member of Europe's common security.

While a divided Germany was once the front of the Cold War, today's challenges have shifted to Eastern Europe, now centrally focused on Ukraine.

Thirty-three years ago, President George Bush pronounced the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States as partners in leadership. But he added this caveat: "Of course, leadership has a constant companion: responsibility. And our responsibility is to look ahead and grasp the promise of the future."

Today, Germany shares the responsibility of securing the defense of its alliance partners, as well as upholding its responsibility to secure

a peaceful global order and to ensure that war and fascism will never be enabled again.

Of all the countries in Europe that should be aware of the lessons of the 20th century, Germany should be the first to recognize the dangers of an unchecked fascist dictator.

It can fulfill the great promise that President Bush—and the world—saw in Germany in 1989. Proof of that trust was evident in the support that Bush gave for German reunification. Today, some 33 years later, Germany can make good on the trust of others but also secure its own security and economic well-being and that of its partners.

But its partners are also facing shared challenges.

In a recent phone call with Chancellor Scholz, President Joe Biden recalled the trust in Germany in agreeing that Ukraine needed to be substantially and continuously supported in the practice of its legitimate right to self-defense.

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Both men will be challenged to sustain long-term support for that commitment within their respective political parameters. The US debate over support for Ukraine is also marked by those who warn of overreaching and even include American “Putin whisperers” who express sympathy for the Russian president’s concerns or worry about the danger of a nuclear war. The political atmosphere in the United States is infected with polarization in many aspects. The war in Ukraine can be caught up in vicious circles of electoral politics as in other democracies, including in Germany.

Both Biden and Scholz will need to stand on common ground in combining efforts to secure transatlantic consensus in this new chapter of confrontation between democracy and autocracy. Such challenges will test the strength of transatlantic ties, as has been the case in past decades.

They are also an opportunity for leaders in partnership to recall the paths taken in building a strong alliance while forging even stronger ones now. A symbol of that effort was once Berlin. Today it is Kyiv.

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