

Embracing military power, Olaf Scholz tries to lead Germany into a new era

Scholz, who took over just four months ago from Angela Merkel, has broken with past policy but is still constrained by history

BERLIN — On the last Saturday in February, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gathered with his top advisers in his vast, glass-walled office and read aloud a speech condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine — remarks that would transform his nation's security and defense policy.

As he queried particular phrases in the draft, his advisers proposed alternatives. Scholz, 63, who has known his nation only at peace, was desperate to avert a third world war, said a senior German official who, like others close to the chancellor, spoke on the condition of anonymity to recount private discussions. Initially, that concern made Scholz reluctant to speak of armaments, above all sending weapons to Ukraine.

But when aides presented the chancellor with the question of arming Ukraine directly or simply releasing German-made weapons purchased by partner nations, a request being weighed the same day, he approved both — assessing that sufficient support existed within his government and party to jettison Germany's long-standing aversion to exporting weapons into conflict zones.

In the course of the deliberations that day, the chancellor also resolved to make explicit how Germany would develop its arsenal to guard against a widening conflict. The country, whose wars of conquest in the previous century had made the projection of military power verboten, would in effect become the world's third-largest military spender, not only bolstering NATO deployments but strengthening the Bundeswehr, Germany's armed forces, with procurements including new armed drones and fighter jets.

"He's aware of what that means," said an aide involved in the discussions. "That with growing abilities will also come growing demands and expectations."

The challenge remained to find the words to announce these policies without alarming the public, recalled Scholz advisers. “We are also doing this for us, for our own security,” the chancellor said in the final version of the speech, which he delivered that Sunday to the German parliament. He declared Russia’s invasion three days earlier, on Feb. 24, a “Zeitenwende,” or “turning of an era.”

As over 100,000 rally for Ukraine, Germany announces vast defense spending increase that may upend European security policy

Scholz’s carefully crafted speech signals his approach to taking the reins of government in a crisis — cautious and calculating, constrained by history. The test is whether the same approach can steer his country through a national security transformation and into a more active and confident role on the world stage.

“Scholz sleepwalked into the crisis, seemingly never thinking it would actually happen, but has now brought about Germany’s most significant U-turn since 1989,” said Peter Wittig, a former German ambassador to the United States, referring to the fall of the Berlin Wall. “The chancellor said, ‘Germany needs hard power.’ ”

But decisions made in crisis can be difficult to sustain, Wittig said. Already Berlin is facing intensifying criticism from Ukrainian officials for not doing enough to export arms. And some in Scholz’s party say his security commitments are unrealistic.

In this new era for Germany, marked by the return of land war to Europe, the past casts a long shadow. When Scholz led his Social Democratic Party to victory in last fall’s elections, he inherited the mantle of German chancellors with complexities to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Angela Merkel, a fluent Russian speaker raised in Germany’s former communist east, was a frequent interlocutor for Putin, pressing him on issues ranging from migration to human rights. She also steered the Normandy Format talks — among France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia — that helped broker a 2014 cease-fire agreement in the contested Ukrainian region of Donbas.

Scholz, who had been finance minister and vice chancellor in Merkel’s final coalition government, positioned himself as her natural heir. She was among

those he consulted in preparing to meet with Putin in February.

Now, Merkel's legacy is coming under new criticism. The center-right chancellor supported the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, bucking U.S. recommendations and deepening her country's dependency on Russian fossil fuels. She also favored dialogue with Putin over more forceful measures. She counseled President Barack Obama against sending lethal aid to Ukraine when he sought her advice in 2014 and 2015, according to current and former German diplomats familiar with the conversations.

Germany, urged to 'stop Putin's war machine,' resists embargo on Russian energy

At the same time, Merkel "had no illusions about Putin's ruthlessness," said a former German diplomat.

That sets her apart from Gerhard Schröder, the chancellor before her, whose refusal to relinquish board seats on Russian energy companies has made him persona non grata in Scholz's party, which he twice led to victory, in 1998 and 2002. His deference to Putin has also threatened to discredit Germany's broader policy of Ostpolitik, the normalization of relations with the East, pioneered by the Social Democrats in the 1970s.

Schröder's access to strongmen in Eastern Europe and Western Asia has at times proved useful to his government. In 2017, he helped persuade Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to release a detained human rights activist, said Ulrich Brandenburg, a former German ambassador to Russia. But the 77-year-old's trip last month to Moscow yielded no results, according to German officials, who said he is acting independently. In a speech last month, Schröder spoke of "many mistakes on both sides."

The legacy of his predecessors is hard for Scholz to escape, said Pavlo Klimkin, a former Ukrainian foreign minister and ambassador to Germany. "Under moral and political pressure, Scholz is clearly trying to exit this friendly mentality to Russia," Klimkin said.

What you need to know about Olaf Scholz

The chancellor's mentality already differed from that of his predecessors, his allies say.

Scholz, a onetime vice president of the International Union of Socialist Youth who criticized the “aggressive-imperialist NATO,” increased Germany’s defense budget when he served as finance minister in Merkel’s cabinet. In 2018, his role in selecting a new foreign minister caused blowback in his center-left party when his pick took a tough line on Russia, accusing the Kremlin of defining itself in opposition to the West. Scholz and others faced internal recriminations, associates said, for advocating what one person called a “Europe First” agenda.

Some within Scholz’s party are still skeptical of such an agenda. Ralf Stegner, a Social Democratic lawmaker and member of the foreign affairs committee, said security in Europe is possible only “with Russia, not against Russia.”

Philipp Türmer, deputy chairman of the Social Democratic Party’s youth organization, said a better-equipped military is a necessity. But “abstract aims of military expansion,” including the NATO commitment of spending 2 percent of economic output on defense, “don’t make sense,” said Türmer, who holds the same position at the youth organization, called Jusos, that Scholz once did.

In the short term, “the party will remain united around Scholz and this goal,” said Nils Schmid, a lawmaker and foreign policy spokesman for Scholz’s Social Democrats in parliament. Then, he said, the chancellor will have to “spell out exactly which projects and which purchases are needed.”

The path is uncharted in a country without a national security council or a well-supplied military. Germany’s army chief took to LinkedIn in the early hours of Russia’s invasion to warn that the country’s armed forces were “more or less powerless.”

Power is what Scholz decided his country needed, after diplomacy failed to bring Putin back from the brink.

During his February visit to Moscow, the chancellor accepted sparkling wine from his Russian counterpart. But when Scholz asked the Russian president, “Mr. Putin, can you assure me that once I leave Moscow, that’s not the moment your fighter jets start to invade Ukraine?” Putin gave no answer, according to someone briefed on the conversation.

Scholz says response to Russia will be ‘united and decisive’ if Ukraine is invaded

A week before Russia's invasion, when the leader of an allied nation asked Scholz on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference what he thought the probability was that Putin would give the order to attack, on a scale from 1 to 10, the chancellor refused to make a prediction, according to a person familiar with the exchange. Scholz also demurred when pressed to counter early Russian hostilities, most notably resisting calls to halt Nord Stream 2 — before reversing course and preventing certification of the controversial project.

Scholz has told associates since his Feb. 27 speech that German power means not only national defense but also economic prosperity and the cultural factors that make Germany an attractive place to live.

A majority of the public backs sending arms to Ukraine, according to recent polling, a reversal from earlier this year during Russia's military buildup, when surveys showed that most Germans still opposed weapons deliveries.

But public confidence is at a low ebb. Only 19 percent of Germans are optimistic about the near future, the lowest share since 1949, according to a March poll by the Allensbach Institute. "The population is in shock," wrote the institute's managing director.

Scholz's calls with Putin since the invasion have been carefully coordinated with European allies, the United States and Ukraine. "It is the Ukrainians that need to call the shots," said the senior German official, so no one will "betray them, even accidentally."

Ukrainian assessments of German leadership are already laced with a sense of betrayal, especially after evidence of civilian massacres emerged from Bucha. Ukraine's ambassador to Germany, Andriy Melnyk, said last weekend that Scholz "finally has to take on this leadership role" and advance tougher sanctions.

In Bucha, the scope of Russian barbarity is coming into focus

Norbert Röttgen, a lawmaker from Germany's center-right Christian Democratic Union, accused Scholz of pursuing a "policy of deliberate halfheartedness." Scenes from Bucha demand the chancellor make good on his language about a new era, Röttgen said.

"A 'Zeitenwende' requires much more than just a defense fund," said the

lawmaker, a former chairman of the foreign affairs committee. “The government has to deliver on its promise that everything fundamentally has changed.”

In a Wednesday appearance before lawmakers, Scholz defended his government’s arms shipments, saying Germany was sending everything it could. He stressed that shipments were being coordinated with NATO, in response to questions about a Ukrainian request for 100 German infantry vehicles. That request was relayed to Scholz and his team by Wladimir Klitschko, the Ukrainian celebrity and former professional boxer, during a visit to Berlin last week, according to a person with knowledge of the meeting. A Ukrainian official declined to comment.

Ukraine presses NATO for immediate aid: ‘Weapons, weapons, weapons’

Despite the decision to send arms into a conflict zone, said a senior German diplomat, “our history doesn’t go away. You will see a careful approach in foreign policy.” The foremost task, according to the diplomat, is to “hold Europe together.”

And that falls to Scholz. “He is the center of power, even in a parliamentary system,” the diplomat said.

Parts of the German media doubt he has what it takes. The chancellor, wrote a columnist in the Munich-based *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, embodies his country’s problems: “weak in leadership, self-centered and helpless.”

That assessment, say Scholz’s allies, is contradicted by his success in overturning decades of foreign policy consensus in a single weekend, and bringing his three-party coalition government along with him. “He’s proactive and pushy,” said Schmid, the lawmaker and foreign policy spokesman. “He wants to see things implemented.”

At 5 feet and 7 inches, Scholz is not an imposing presence. When he was mayor of Hamburg, from 2011 to 2018, he used to row before cabinet meetings on Alster Lake. Now, he uses an indoor water rower — or else runs two times a week. Despite his serious manner, he has a mischievous, high-pitched laugh, say associates, and aides address him with the informal pronoun “du,” instead of the professional “Sie.”

French President Emmanuel Macron, a longtime advocate of greater European

military cooperation, has staked out a more high-profile role rallying the continent behind the Ukrainian cause. Biden went to Warsaw to proclaim a new “battle for democracy.” Scholz is less comfortable standing at a lectern than he is sitting at a conference table. “He’s someone who knows his briefing book,” said the senior German diplomat.

After call with Putin, Macron convinced that ‘the worst is yet to come’ and that Russia wants to take all of Ukraine

That attitude also shapes Scholz’s engagement with fellow leaders. He feels especially aligned with Macron and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, said the senior German official, who added, “Olaf Scholz is not the guy who bonds in a way that they’re best buddies and drinking, but I think they all click politically.”

Scholz’s advisers have benefited from strong ties with Biden’s team, said senior officials in Berlin.

Scholz’s closest confidant, Wolfgang Schmidt, the chancellery chief of staff who has the rank of a cabinet minister, speaks regularly to William J. Burns, the CIA director, who was in Berlin last month. Scholz’s chief economic adviser, Jörg Kukies, a former Goldman Sachs banker, works with Daleep Singh, a deputy national security adviser handling sanctions. And foreign policy adviser Jens Plötner consults with Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser.

The chancellor’s advisers hope Biden’s leadership role in responding to Russian aggression might help him win over Trump supporters who crave American strength. And they’re even inclined to help. One adviser mused about Scholz and Macron, who is up for reelection this month, traveling to the United States and reaching out to American voters.

“They could go to where the F-35 is produced,” said the adviser, referring to the combat aircraft, which is made in Fort Worth and which Germany has promised to buy. “And they could say, ‘That’s your leader who made this happen.’ ”

Vanessa Guinan-Bank contributed to this report.

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