

New German Chancellor Scholz Makes European Debut

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Friday heads to Paris and EU and NATO headquarters, with Russia tensions and climate in the spotlight for his first foreign trip since he took office this week.

Germany's new leader has pledged continuity with his predecessor Angela Merkel, who stepped down Wednesday after 16 years in power.

Scholz took power with a disparate new coalition of ecologist Greens and business-friendly Free Democrats, which has agreed to strengthen Europe's "strategic sovereignty".

In keeping with tradition, his first official trip will take him to France where he will meet President Emmanuel Macron.

He will continue on to Brussels for meetings with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and EU chief Ursula von der Leyen and European Council president Charles Michel ahead of a bloc summit next week.

The European response to the pandemic and the climate crisis, growing calls for a diplomatic boycott of the Olympics in China and the Russian troop build-up on Ukraine's border are set to dominate discussions.

Scholz on Thursday already warned Moscow of "consequences" for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a Russian project to deliver natural gas to Germany and a major source of friction with many partners.

As Western powers threaten punishing new sanctions against Moscow, the project could soon play a central role.

"With Nord Stream 2, Germany has the big geopolitical weapon in its hand without ever having sought it," said analyst Ulrich Speck of the German Marshall Fund.

Laying the groundwork for the visit, new Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Greens said in Paris Thursday that Berlin would set its stance on Russia and

China in close consultation with European allies.

She praised French plans to reform carbon taxation when Paris assumes the EU presidency in January, while hailing the 2015 Paris climate accord as a “stellar moment in international diplomacy”.

Baerbock stressed her ministry would now “help take the lead” for Berlin on future multilateral climate initiatives, as she underlined the centrality of the rule of law and human rights in the EU ahead of a stop in Poland Friday.

However, she acknowledged that Germany, which will close all of its atomic power plants by next year for safety reasons, did not see eye-to-eye with France in its bid to name nuclear as a suitable energy source to meet Europe’s net-zero climate goal.

Scholz, a centrist Social Democrat, is a known entity, having served as Merkel’s finance minister and vice chancellor.

Although he long backed Germany’s trademark budget austerity goals, he threw his weight behind massive government spending to help Europe cope with the pandemic — going further than Merkel.

“Europe senses that Scholz is more likely to continue the Merkel course on the European Stability and Growth Pact” and its strict debt rules, said Anne Gellinek of public broadcaster ZDF.

Scholz is expected to face renewed calls for Germany to match its economic weight with more responsibility in global security affairs.

The new coalition pact makes no mention of the pledge for all NATO member states to commit two percent of their GDP to defence by 2024.

Instead, it will commit “in the long run” three percent of spending to the military, diplomacy and development aid, a clause already attacked by Merkel’s conservatives, now in opposition, as a “sham”.

French Foreign Minister Yves Le Drian asked Thursday for stronger German support in foreign missions, including operations against jihadist groups in the Sahel region, saying Berlin had “an important role to play”.

Political scientist Andrea Roemmele of the Hertie School of Governance expects closer cooperation with Paris on security policy under Scholz.

But with the French presidential elections looming next year, Berlin will likely “take a wait-and-see stance” on projects, particularly given the threat of a strong showing for the far right.

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