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The Transatlantic Policy of the Olaf Scholz Government (2021–2025)

Abstract: The article presents the transatlantic policy of Olaf Scholz's government (2021–2025), centred on its bilateral relationship with the United States and Germany's engagement within NATO. It seeks to answer the question of how this policy has changed under the influence of the war in Ukraine and the associated growing threats to the security of Germany and Europe. For this purpose, the relations between Scholz's cabinet and the American administration are analyzed, attempting to identify areas of cooperation and points of contention. In conclusion, it can be stated that the Scholz cabinet's balance in relations with the American administration, as well as within the transatlantic community, has been positive. Germany had proved itself to be a dependable ally, giving comprehensive support to Ukraine, and ranking second only to the US in total aid to Kyiv.

Key words: Germany, United States, NATO, Chancellor Olaf Scholz, president Joseph Biden, transatlantic policy

Introduction

For decades, the transatlantic policy of the Federal Republic of Germany, centred on its bilateral relationship with the United States and its commitment to NATO, has been a cornerstone of the country's national security architecture and a defining feature of its role on the world stage. While Bonn and later Berlin have gone through different phases in this alignment, from pronounced compliance during the Cold War to adopting a more assertive stance after reunification, the underlying commitment to the transatlantic framework has remained a constant central tenet of Germany's foreign policy.

This study examines the transatlantic policy of the government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who assumed office at a time of acute geopolitical instability marked by the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and a pervasive sense of insecurity across Europe. These developments forced Germany to rethink its priorities, with Scholz government placing greater emphasis on security and ramping up defence efforts, notably by increasing military aid to Ukraine. This shift was famously captured in the Chancellor's *Zeitenwende* ("historic turning point") address. As a result, the transatlantic alliance assumed even greater weight in the strategic calculus of the ruling coalition.

The analysis examines the extent to which Germany's transatlantic strategy evolved under Scholz in response to new international circumstances and emerging threats. It focuses on the strategic content added by the *Zeitenwende* agenda, the nature of bilateral relations between the Scholz cabinet and the Biden administration amid an unprecedented crisis environment, the degree of alignment/divergence in tackling shared challenges, particularly the war in Ukraine, and the extent and nature of Germany's engagement in the transatlantic community. It also considers whether Berlin has fulfilled its NATO

commitments and, under Scholz, acted as a trustworthy ally in NATO and a dependable partner for the United States.

The study draws on a wide range of sources, including official governmental records (statements, party programmes, political speeches, and declarations by senior officials), as well as expert analyses, policy briefs, and academic reports. It also incorporates media coverage and online materials. All these have been carefully examined and critically assessed to form the empirical foundation for this research.

Building credibility

Germany's federal elections of September 2021 brought a major reshuffling to the German political scene. The departure of Chancellor Angela Merkel from the CDU, after 16 years of leading successive coalition governments in various configurations, marked the close of an era. Merkel had consistently pursued a firmly Atlanticist foreign policy, working to maintain strong ties with Washington, which she saw as essential for both Germany's security and its influence in Europe and beyond. Even during Donald Trump's first presidency (2017–2021), which at that time strained transatlantic unity in Berlin and across the transatlantic community, Merkel endeavoured to smooth over tensions and avoid clashes that might seriously damage US-German relations and undermine NATO.

The "traffic light" coalition, named for the colours of its three parties, the SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens, and the FDP, was formed on 8 December 2021, led by SPD Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Notably, the Christian Democrats, traditionally perceived as Germany's most reliably pro-Atlantic party, were out of government. The SPD, the coalition's leading partner, has historically been more distant toward the United States and at times pushed for a reduced American military presence in Germany. The SPD has also included a notable number of *Russlandsversteher*, politicians who "understood Russia" and were keen to maintain best possible relations with it, particularly in the economic domain. The most famous of these was former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (1998–2005), who had close personal ties with Vladimir Putin and deep connections to Russian business interests.

The Greens, now thoroughly reformed and with a robust pro-transatlantic wing, traces its origins to the pacifist and anti-American protest movements of the 1980s. Their former leader Joschka Fischer emerged from the 1968 protest movement which opposed, among other things, US foreign policy. In the Scholz government, the foreign ministry went to high-profile Green politician Annalena Baerbock. Of the coalition partners, only the FDP has consistently avoided major run-ins with the United States.

Despite ideological divergences within the coalition, the incoming government confirmed that staying anchored in the Atlantic alliance was a strategic necessity. The coalition agreement explicitly called "the transatlantic partnership and friendship with the United States central pillars of [its] international engagement." It also stressed that US-German relations should be built on a European model of partnership: upholding the international order through shared values, resisting authoritarian influence, and fostering cooperation across the EU's eastern and southern peripheries (*Koalitionsvertrag...*, 2021). Even so, many anticipated that Scholz's government would face a test of credibility in managing relations with the United States.

The rapidly changing international environment made that challenge even sharper for the new government. The early weeks of Scholz's term coincided with rising tensions over Ukraine. From late autumn 2021, Russia began massing troops along Ukraine's border, and on the Belorussian-Ukrainian frontier. US Intelligence left little doubt about Putin's hostile intentions towards Ukraine. The Biden administration briefed European allies and, from late 2021, stepped up arms deliveries to Ukraine.

This looming crisis dominated the first trip to Washington by Germany's new foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, on 5 January 2022. Before leaving, she stressed the value of the transatlantic alliance: "The more difficult the times we live in, the more important strong partnerships are – and we as Europeans have no stronger partner than the United States." On the Ukraine situation, she added: "Russia's actions come with a clear price tag, but the only way out of the crisis is through dialogue" (*Germany's Baerbock...*, 2022).

After meeting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is thought to have shared detailed intelligence about the threat of Russian attack, Baerbock's tone towards Russia hardened. She warned that any further Russian incursions into Ukraine would result in "serious consequences" for Russia. At the same time, she set out Berlin's stance, which differed from Washington's. While Blinken announced increased arms deliveries to Kyiv, Baerbock said that Berlin was not contemplating sending weapons to Ukraine (*Ibid.*). This showed a clear gap between the two governments on military aid to Ukraine.

Frictions grew further over the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which was awaiting German certification. Although in July 2021 the Biden administration had agreed, under a bilateral deal with Berlin, to stop actively opposing the pipeline's completion, US criticism remained strong, with many in Washington seeing collaboration with Russia's Gazprom as problematic (Kiwerska, 2022, pp. 206–207).

During Baerbock's Washington visit, US officials restated their opposition to Nord Stream 2 and hinted that, if Russia invaded, the US would not accept the pipeline going into operation. Baerbock's response was less clear-cut, saying only that "if Russia weaponizes energy or continues its aggression against Ukraine, we will implement effective countermeasures" (*Germany's Baerbock...*, 2022). Baerbock also backed Berlin's prevailing view that dialogue with Moscow was still needed. Asked about Scholz's apparent attempts at a diplomatic "new opening" with Russia, she confirmed that the Chancellor wanted to resolve the crisis through negotiation.

This position did little to change how Scholz was seen in Washington. His first visit to the United States as chancellor, on 7 February 2022, came amid heavy criticism in American news media over Germany's reticence on Ukraine and its perceived softness towards Russia. Germany's refusal to supply Ukraine with weapons, while others, especially the US, were already doing so, its hesitance to block Nord Stream 2 as leverage against Russia, and Scholz's prolonged public silence on the Ukraine crisis all drew negative reviews. US media labelled Germany an "unreliable partner," and Scholz himself "invisible" and "unassertive" (Burchard, 2022).

Given that, in her final year in office, Merkel had managed to establish a good working relationship with the Biden administration, Scholz came under considerable pressure to restore Germany's credibility as a dependable partner. At a joint press conference with President Biden, he struck a more determined note, stating that Russia posed a threat to

Ukraine and warning that it would “pay a high price as we are prepared to impose sanctions.” However, he stopped short of naming Nord Stream 2 a potential lever over Moscow, saying only that any sanctions in the event of Russian aggression against Ukraine would be tough and coordinated with allies (*Pressekonferenz...*, 2022).

Scholz also attempted to deflect criticisms over Germany’s refusal to send weapons to Ukraine by pointing to Germany’s substantial economic aid for Ukraine. Biden, seemingly aware of Scholz’s domestic political constraints, backed him up referring to Germany’s wider support for Kyiv, signalling that he understood Berlin’s reluctance to deliver arms into an active conflict zone (*Ibid.*).

The Chancellor’s assurances that Germany was committed to acting together, including through a “robust sanctions package,” were enough for Biden to publicly vouch for Germany’s reliability. I have no doubt about Germany at all. It is one of the leading physical powers in NATO.” Biden also declared that “the notion that Nord Stream 2 would go forward with an invasion by the Russians, it’s just not going to happen.” This hinted that some form of an understanding “behind closed doors” had been reached between the two leaders. Biden also referred to contingency plans for alternative gas supplies to Europe and for “cutting Russia off from its buyers” (*Ibid.*). In doing so, Biden highlighted a central issue tied to the sanction plans – ensuring alternative energy sources to replace Russian supplies, not just for Germany but also for other European allies.

Scholz’s visit succeeded in signalling that Germany would respond swiftly and in step with its Western partners if Russia attacked. He repeated these reassurances during meetings on Capitol Hill with US senators and members of Congress. Even so, US criticism of Germany’s refusal to supply arms persisted. Berlin even blocked Estonia from transferring old East German military equipment to Ukraine.

Further complaints centred on Berlin’s ambiguous stance on Nord Stream 2 and its continued insistence that a diplomatic solution was still possible. By this stage, the Biden administration found it evident that Russia was determined to resort to military action, and that Scholz’s attempt to influence Putin would almost certainly be futile. US officials were also frustrated by Germany’s hesitation to impose certain sanctions, such as exclusion of Russian banks from the SWIFT financial messaging system. Though this dissatisfaction was not always voiced publicly, American pressure on Berlin continued behind the scenes.

It is worth noting, however, that on 22 February 2022 Scholz announced that the certification of Nord Stream 2 would be suspended indefinitely, effectively pulling the plug on the project. This showed that, in the end, he kept the commitments made privately during his Washington trip. The day before, Scholz had joined a video call with Biden and Macron. His presence in these top-level consultations placed him in the President’s close inner circle, a sign not only of Washington’s recognition of Germany’s strategic clout, but also of its confidence that Scholz would act decisively “in the hour of need.”

Russia’s aggression and the *Zeitenwende*

The real test of the Scholz administration’s credibility began with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Scholz backed the exclusion of certain Rus-

sian banks from SWIFT as part of the EU's first wave of sanctions, a move consistent with the Biden administration's robust response to Moscow's assault. Scholz also changed course on military aid, announcing that Germany would send anti-tank weapons and anti-aircraft missile systems to Ukraine and that in the face of Putin's aggression, there was no other choice.

A truly defining moment came on 27 February 2022, when Chancellor Scholz declared a *Zeitenwende*, or a "historic turning point" in German foreign and security policy in response to Russia's invasion (*Regierungserklärung...*, 2022). At the heart of this approach was a fundamental shift in Germany's policy on Russia: whereas Moscow had once been treated as a strategic partner under the doctrine of *Russlandpolitik* and economic engagement encapsulated by the mantra *Wandel durch Handel* ("change through trade"), the new policy demanded not only condemnation of Russian aggression but also active participation in EU sanctions and weapons supplies to Ukraine. Scholz spoke of a "pivot" in Germany's security policy, announcing a €100 billion special fund to equip and modernise the Bundeswehr (*Sondervermögen*), framing it as "an investment in the defence of democracy." He also pledged to raise defence spending to over 2% of GDP (*Ibid.*), the largest boost to Germany's military budget since the Federal Republic was founded. His unprecedented military build-up answered long-standing US demands for Germany to do more on defence. Under President Trump, the issue reached a boiling point: Germany was indeed spending less than 1.5% of GDP on defence, well below the NATO target agreed in 2014 to hit 2% of GDP within a decade.

The *Zeitenwende* therefore marked not just a new policy direction, but – at least in the last three decades – Germany's unique willingness to take greater responsibility for its own defence and for the security of its allies. The Chancellor's pledge to fully and unconditionally fulfil NATO commitments, defend "every square metre of Alliance territory" and bolster Germany's military presence on NATO's eastern flank must be seen in this light. He also reaffirmed Germany's continued engagement in NATO's tactical nuclear sharing programme, underpinned by plans to buy American F35 jets for this role (*Ibid.*).

Unsurprisingly, the *Zeitenwende* announcement caused a stir in the United States. In just a few days, Germany was seen to have gone from NATO's most hesitant member to a full partner. Some even claimed it showed Germany's readiness to assume greater responsibility within NATO and marked a return to the kind of German leadership last seen under Merkel, after a period in which her successor had seemed hesitant and indecisive. In any case, after the announcement of the "historic turning point," Scholz's standing in Washington rose sharply, and the Biden administration felt vindicated in its belief that it would act when it mattered.

However, it soon became clear that putting the *Zeitenwende* into practice, especially on arms deliveries to Ukraine, was slow and limited. Early German military aid fell short of both the government's rhetoric and the country's economic capacity. While Germany did send weapons such as ex-East German anti-aircraft missiles and Bundeswehr anti-tank systems, deliveries were often delayed, and certain weapons systems, especially offensive ones, were withheld altogether.

Scholz sought to justify this caution by stressing the need for joint action with allies. This required that support for Ukraine be closely consulted and coordinated with allies,

especially the US. Joint action was also used to explain why certain types of weapons were not being supplied. A related argument was that support for Ukraine must avoid escalating the war and dragging Germany or NATO directly into conflict with Russia. Scholz's reluctance was partly shaped by German public opinion. On 19 April 2022, 51% of Germans supported sending arms to Ukraine. However, among the voters of SPD, the chancellor's party, support was lower – only 45% in favour and 46% opposed. Many believed that dialogue with Russia must continue, and that diplomatic measures, i.e. *Frieden schaffen ohne Waffen* (peace without weapons) remained a viable goal.

While Germany's sluggish early arms deliveries to Ukraine drew sharp criticism, the Biden administration welcomed greater involvement of German armed forces in NATO. The invasion had strengthened Germany's Atlantic orientation, and in his *Zeitenwende* address to the Bundestag, Scholz had underlined the alliance's importance. At the same time, he reaffirmed Germany's commitment to nuclear sharing, something that Washington valued. One of the first purchases financed by the Bundeswehr's special fund was American-made CH-47 Chinook transport helicopters worth about €6.5 billion, alongside contracts for F-35 fighters. This, too, was welcomed in Washington. Leading politicians from Germany's mainstream parties stressed how the country's security strategy dovetailed with defending its NATO allies, whose role and importance were strongly emphasised. The prevailing view was that in the face of potential war, shoring up the transatlantic alliance had become the bedrock of German foreign and security policy.

Public support for NATO in Germany reflected this shift, rising to 70% by mid-2022, compared with 57% in 2020 (*Pew Research Centre*, June 2022). This put Germany fourth, after Poland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, in terms of backing for the alliance. Minister Baerbock referred to this during a US visit in early August 2022. Speaking at The New School in New York, she emphasised she saw: "a genuine, renewed appreciation for the transatlantic partnership among Germans." Linking the war in Ukraine to an opportunity to build "a stronger, lasting transatlantic partnership fit for the 21st century," she highlighted Germany's role in reviving the idea of "partners in leadership" first called for by President George H. W. Bush even before German reunification in May 1989. "We see clearly," she said, "that the time has come in which we should commit to this partnership in leadership. By 'we', I am not referring to Germans or Americans [...]. The 'we' applies to both Europeans and Americans. My country should help chart the course for Europe" (*Rede der Bundesministerin*..., 2022).

Germany's commitment to the transatlantic alliance, and its effort to strengthen both that partnership and its own credibility, were also evident in the increased involvement of the German armed forces in delivering on their commitments to NATO, particularly on the eastern flank. This included German air force participation in NATO operations to secure Romanian airspace and raising the Bundeswehr presence in Lithuania from 550 to 900 troops. Bundeswehr also deployed 700 troops in Slovakia with Patriot air-defence systems, further strengthening NATO's eastern flank.

Stationing additional German forces close to the war zone was vital for regional security and also helped ease the burden on US forces in Europe. Since the start of the war, the US military made unprecedented contributions to NATO security on the eastern flank, especially in Poland, but also in Germany, where two extra US armoured brigades were deployed. German naval deployments in the North Sea, the Baltic and the Medi-

ranean added to allied support. In this way, Putin's imperial ambitions had the unintended effect of spurring Germany to step up its role in NATO, strengthening both European security and transatlantic relations.

Joint but disappointing actions

Chancellor Scholz's constant refrain about "coordinating with NATO," which often came across as a handy excuse for dragging his feet on weapons deliveries and holding back offensive arms, at one point put a real strain on relations with the Biden administration and even triggered a major row.¹ In January 2023, the question of sending German Leopard 2 battle tanks to Ukraine, highly valuable at that stage of the war, was front and centre. Public hints that Scholz was making the supply of Leopards conditional on the US agreeing to send its own M1 Abrams tanks provoked a reaction from Washington. On 19 January 2023, during a phone call between Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor, and Jens Plöttner, Scholz's adviser on foreign and security policy, Sullivan made no attempt to conceal his frustration, making it clear he found it unacceptable for Berlin to set conditions for the Americans. A tense exchange also took place between US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Wolfgang Schmidt, head of the German Chancellery. Germany insisted that any delivery of "battle tanks" had to be a joint effort, and that Germany would supply its Leopards only if American Abram tanks were sent as well (Sattar, 2023; DeYoung, Morris, 2023).

This tug-of-war between Berlin and Washington, a major source of friction during Scholz's time as chancellor, ultimately ended in success for Berlin. The "joint action" approach paid off: despite the Pentagon's view that Abrams tanks were too complex and costly to operate, President Biden agreed in late January 2023 to send them to Ukraine, meeting Scholz's condition. That said, it was clear Biden was far from thrilled at having been manoeuvred into it by the Chancellor.

Scholz's next visit in the US was set for 3 March 2023. The fact it was to be a working visit with only a one-on-one meeting with Biden, no joint press conference, not even a briefing, was widely read as a sign of Biden's dissatisfaction with Berlin's foot-dragging on certain weapons deliveries. The Chancellor stuck to his well-worn lines about "carefully considered steps coordinated with NATO" and voiced repeated concerns about the war escalating. While the Biden administration shared those concerns, especially the risk of NATO being pulled directly into the conflict, Scholz's approach fell well short of the bold changes expected from the *Zeitenwende*. Germany's Christian Democrat opposition made this point forcefully, noting additionally that Scholz had broken with the tradition of bringing business leaders to Washington, a nod to the US's role as one of Germany's biggest trading partners.

Biden himself had not paid Germany an official visit, apart from attending the G7 summit at Elmau Castle in the Bavarian Alps in summer 2022 and a brief stopover at Ramstein Air Base en route to Kyiv and Warsaw. His second visit to Poland within a year, on 20–22 February 2023, was heavily discussed in Germany. It was seen as not

¹ NATO has not issued a formal statement on the supply of weapons systems to Ukraine, leaving it up to each individual country to make that decision.

only underlining Poland's central role as the closest major state to the front line and the main hub for channelling military supplies to Ukraine but also as a reflection of its newly gained geopolitical clout. As the German press put it: "The centre of gravity has shifted eastward. The geopolitical heart of Europe is no longer somewhere between Berlin, Paris and London. The driving force behind Western support for Ukraine comes from Tallinn, Riga and, above all, Warsaw" (Lau, 2023).

These far-reaching conclusions were verified by Scholz's March visit to Washington. Admittedly, the bad impression made by the tank dispute had not fundamentally damaged Germany's standing with the Biden administration, which still viewed Berlin as a key European partner on Ukraine and other global issues. And while Washington may have been frustrated with Berlin's pace, it also recognised that the deep policy overhaul promised by the *Zeitenwende* would take time and careful justification. Germany's post-war pacifism was part of the lessons learned from history. The Americans were also aware of the chronic neglect of the German armed forces. €100 billion would not be enough to get them up to scratch, and long-standing problems in procuring new equipment and meeting NATO obligations were already apparent. What mattered to Washington was that Germany was, however slowly, moving towards a "historic turning point" in German defence policy, and that its stance on Russia, energy transition and, last but not least, military support for Ukraine, was sure to be realised.

The Scholz–Biden meeting reaffirmed both leaders' commitment to the relationship. In a short statement before their talks, Scholz stressed the importance of allied support for Ukraine and of showing a united front against Russia, stating how crucial it was to send the message demonstrating that the two countries would "continue to work together for as long as is necessary." Biden, in turn, underlined Germany's military and moral backing for Ukraine, speaking of its leadership and praising "changes in German politics" while diplomatically sidestepping the fact that not everyone was happy with the pace of those changes (*Statement von Bundeskanzler...*, 2023).

A united front at the NATO summit in Vilnius

Chancellor Scholz's cautious stance, frustrating those who had taken the "historic turning point" in German foreign and security policy to mean a fundamental and dynamic change, proved handy for the Biden administration when Ukraine's NATO membership came under discussion. This was one of the headline issues at the NATO summit in Vilnius on 11–12 July 2023. The member states broadly agreed that Ukraine's future lay in NATO. Against this backdrop, President Volodymyr Zelensky, invited to attend in person, had expected the summit to deliver a clear pathway to NATO membership for Ukraine, if not an outright invitation. However, the final outcome was a let-down for Kyiv, owing largely to the shared position of Washington and Berlin.

While Central and Eastern European states, along with the UK and France, leaned towards meeting Kyiv's expectations, the US and Germany pushed back against taking any concrete steps. For Germany, this reluctance chimed with Scholz's trademark caution. President Biden, meanwhile, defended his stance as necessary to keep the Alliance united. "I don't think there is unanimity in NATO about whether or not to bring Ukraine

into the NATO family now, at this moment, in the middle of a war,” he told CNN just before the summit. He also argued that Ukraine was “not yet ready” for membership in an organisation that requires meeting a full set of conditions (*CNN Exclusive: Biden says..., 2023*).

Whatever the official explanations, the underlying reason for the US and German position was Russia. Scholz in particular, without spelling it out, believed that fixing a date for Ukraine’s NATO entry could spark direct military conflict with Russia, which has been threatening nuclear retaliation. In that respect, the German Chancellor could take some comfort in knowing he was not the lone voice holding back but was aligned with the US president. His address to the Bundestag shortly before Vilnius struck a similar note to Biden’s, urging: “We must take a sober look at the current situation. That is why I propose that we focus in Vilnius on the highest priority, namely strengthening Ukraine’s combat power” (*Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler..., 2023*).

Germany and the US thus joined the UK and France in negotiations ahead of the Vilnius summit, aiming to produce a declaration of long-term support for Ukraine. This was intended as a makeweight for the absence of firm decisions on NATO membership. At a Vilnius press conference, Scholz underlined the importance of providing “security commitments (*Sicherheitszusagen*) for Ukraine that would hold after the war.” He announced agreements that would include current support but also address the needs of peacetime. He outlined agreements to deliver ongoing assistance and prepare for peacetime needs, stressing that while Ukraine would get active support, including arms deliveries and the mobilisation of help from other nations, it, like any other country, would still need to meet all the usual NATO entry criteria (*Pressestatement von Bundeskanzler..., 2023*). On this point, the German and American positions were unquestionably aligned.

This alignment shaped the eventual Vilnius agreements, which Kyiv found disappointing. The final communiqué, an earlier draft of which reportedly included a more specific roadmap for membership, and was later softened under US and German pressure, stated that Ukraine would be invited to join NATO “when Allies agree and the conditions are met” (*Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023*). Even so, there were partial gains for Ukraine: the dropping of the standard membership preparation plan requirement, a multi-year programme to bring Ukraine’s armed forces into full interoperability with NATO, and the G7’s pledge of long-term security support. The summit also created a new Ukraine–NATO Council to deepen institutional cooperation and act as a ‘membership tool’ to help prepare Ukraine for accession (Bayer, 2023).

While in Vilnius, Scholz announced an extra €700 million in military aid for Ukraine, including Patriot air defence systems, upgraded Leopard tanks, Marder infantry fighting vehicles, and training for Ukrainian troops (*Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler..., 2023*). These pledges were of real value to Kyiv, but Germany’s stance on NATO membership, clearly aligned with Washington, risked leaving Ukraine feeling frustrated and disappointed that Russia’s threats had paid off.

From Washington’s point of view, what mattered was not so much Berlin’s backing on NATO membership, but its readiness, declared in Vilnius, to take on greater responsibilities within the transatlantic community. Chancellor Scholz committed Germany to strengthening NATO’s defence capabilities, particularly on its eastern flank. From 2025, 35,000 German troops would serve in two high-readiness formations agreed at the

previous year's Madrid summit, and Lithuania would host a permanent German brigade. These were the only firm pledges from NATO members in Vilnius for bolstering the eastern flank. Scholz also promised Germany would hit the 2% of GDP defence spending target by 2024 – something the Americans had been keen to hear (*Ibid.*).

This signalled that the 'traffic light' coalition understood it needed to pull its weight in NATO and shoulder more responsibility for its own security and that of its allies. With Ukraine's future still uncertain, US presidential elections looming, and global threats on the rise all across the world, "free riding" was out of the question. A stronger German commitment to European security was seen as essential, not only to keep the transatlantic alliance robust, but also to maintain a close working relationship with the Biden administration. Much like in the Cold War era, these priorities formed the backbone of the Scholz government's foreign and security policy.

Germany's efforts to bolster Europe's resilience should be read in this light. Michael Roth, the SPD chair of the Bundestag's Foreign Affairs Committee, stressed: "Germany must do more for its own and European security," citing the need to steadily grow the defence budget, strengthen Europe's arms industry, and expand its strategic capabilities (*Roth: EU muss..., 2023*).

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock underlined the importance of transatlantic ties when she began a ten-day visit to the US on 12 September 2023. She said she was determined to strengthen ties with America, pointing out that no other country had closer or deeper connections with Europe than the United States. "I would like to strengthen this bond with the entire American people." She continued: "The importance of the transatlantic partnership has been demonstrated to us particularly in the last year and a half. [...] The United States and Europe stand shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people. [...] My talks in Washington will focus on how we, the transatlantic family, can continue to stand up to Putin's insane war with perseverance and unity" (*Out of many..., 2023*).

Baerbock's visit to the US also served to counter claims from the US right that Germany was not pulling its weight on Ukraine. At that point, Germany was already the second-largest donor after the US, having provided €17.09 billion between February 2022 and August 2023 (compared with €42.10 billion from the US and €6.58 billion from the UK). US Secretary of State Antony Blinken praised Germany's contribution during a joint press conference on 15 September, at which Baerbock reaffirmed: "Germany is prepared to support Ukraine as long as it takes." This phrase, now a fixture in Scholz's statements on the war, along with Baerbock's emphasis on the transatlantic alliance, was aimed squarely at convincing US policymakers and the American public that support for Ukraine must remain unwavering and that Germany would honour its pledge of solidarity with the US and its allies.

President Frank-Walter Steinmeier played a similar role during a one-day trip to the US on 6 October 2023. Officially, the visit, announced only the night before, was to celebrate German-American Friendship Day, marking the arrival of the first German settlers in Philadelphia in 1683. In reality, the context was more pressing: political turmoil in Washington, with the sacking of the Republican House Speaker immediately before the budget vote, casting doubt on future US military funding for Ukraine. The meeting between the two presidents was a chance to reassure allies about America's reliability.

Steinmeier received such assurances and pledged in return that Germany would “continue to support Ukraine in its fight for its country, its freedom and its democracy.” On the broader relationship, he reiterated: “Our alliance is crucial for our consistent commitment to supporting the Ukrainians and their heroic defence of their country” (*Biden and Steinmeier...*, 2023).

For Washington, a key takeaway from Vilnius, as stated in the Vilnius NATO summit communiqué, was that Germany was on track to meet the 2% defence spending target by 2024. Defence Minister Boris Pistorius even floated the possibility in November 2023 of going beyond that threshold. It was also decided that in 2024 Germany’s military aid to Ukraine would double from €4 billion to €8 billion (eventually finalised at €7 billion).

Germany’s growing role in backing Ukraine was a major reason the Biden administration treated Berlin as a pivotal European ally. Biden spoke of a “special relationship” with Germany on 9 February 2024, when he hosted Scholz at the White House for the third time. The invitation came from Biden himself, who wanted to discuss current threats face-to-face, but also to express his gratitude: “I want to thank you, Olaf, for your leadership from the very beginning. And you have done something that no one thought could get done: You’ve doubled Germany’s military aid to Ukraine this year” (*Remarks by President Biden...*, 2024).

Scholz, for his part, consistently stressed the value of working closely with the US. “What we need now is to work together to enable Ukraine to defend itself and send a strong signal to the Russian president,” he said shortly before leaving for Washington. Just before meeting Biden, he added: “Germany and the United States must play a major role in maintaining world peace. This is essential in the face of Russia’s ongoing aggression in Ukraine. I find it imperative that we do everything in our power to support Ukraine and give it a chance to defend itself.” In claiming that German-American relations were the best they had been in years, he was not overstating the case: the level of cooperation was high, focused on supporting Ukraine and tackling shared challenges across Europe and beyond (*Pressestatement von Bundeskanzler...*, 2024).

The prospect of Trump’s return to the White House

At one point, concerns arose over whether this “special closeness” between Washington and Berlin could last, given the growing prospect of Trump returning to the White House. The mood surrounding the US presidential race, underway since 2023, inevitably seeped into US-German relations, if only because it forced German diplomacy to plan for the “worst-case scenario” of a Trump’s win. “If Trump gets a second term, he will pose an even greater challenge for Germany, Europe and the rest of the world than he did the first time around. His leadership will probably be even more unrestrained and provocative,” predicted Michael Link, the Scholz government’s coordinator for transatlantic cooperation (*Ampelpolitiker warnen...*, 2023).

German diplomacy responded on two fronts: first, by building bridges with people in Trump’s circle and Republican lawmakers, looking for shared ground, especially on trade; second, by hammering home to Americans the value of the transatlantic alliance and showing it was serious about allied security. Berlin was well aware that the contin-

ued US military presence in Europe – as a security guarantor – and America’s ongoing support for Ukraine were both at stake, and both were vital to Germany.

As part of its diplomatic outreach in the US, German officials promoted the *Zeitenwende* as proof that Berlin had answered Trump’s earlier demand for Germany to stop freeloading and being, as he once put it, “a parasite nation,” and boost defence spending. It highlighted the €100 billion increase in Bundeswehr budget and the pledge to achieve the NATO target of spending 2% of GDP on defence, the very essence of the “historic turning point.” During her 10-day visit to the US in September 2023, the head of German diplomacy met with Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate minority leader, travelled to Texas to meet with Governor Greg Abbott, a staunch Trump ally, and even went on pro-Trump right-wing TV channel Fox News to call for joint action, insisting: “We are stronger than Putin’s brutal aggression” (*German foreign minister...*, 2023).

In February 2024, during a trip to Washington, Chancellor Scholz met not only with Democrats but also with Republicans, including Senator Lindsey Graham, a loyal Trump supporter, at the German ambassador’s residence. His strategy was plain: he also invited American business leaders to a special breakfast, pitching investment in Germany and signalling that “Germany is open for business”, an appeal he rightly judged would resonate with Trump.

Strengthening Europe’s own defence capabilities was also seen as a hedge against Trump’s possible return to the White House. That urgency grew after Trump, at a rally in South Carolina on 10 February 2024, controversially called into question America’s commitment to its allies, especially those he claimed were not pulling their weight, and went so far as to say he would encourage Russia to “do whatever they want” to countries not fulfilling their commitments to NATO (Hayden, Ward, Cienski, 2024). This challenged not only Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, but also the future of NATO and the transatlantic community as a whole. In response to Trump’s shocking statement, the German Foreign Ministry posted on X: “One for all, all for one – this NATO principle ensures the security of over 950 million people,” accompanied by the hashtag “StrongerTogether” (Folkman, 2024).

In Germany, Trump’s remarks reignited debates about the future of US–German relations, the transatlantic alliance, European security and the continuation of American aid to Ukraine. Analysts expected renewed US–EU trade tensions between the US and Germany and the European Union, possibly escalating into another trade war. In addition to high tariffs on EU goods, the German Coordinator for Transatlantic Cooperation, Michael Link, even anticipated the US might pull US troops out of Germany and renege on its NATO commitments, including Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Since this would effectively amount to America quitting NATO altogether, this raised the questions of what would happen to the Alliance and whether Europe could keep NATO alive on its own. The answer carried huge implications for Europe’s security, which under a Trump presidency could see the transatlantic partnership reduced to a shadow of its former self.

This was the background behind the statement by Roth, head of the Bundestag’s Foreign Affairs Committee, urging Europe to toughen up against outside threats no matter who was in the White House. “Germany needs to do more for its own and Europe’s security,” he said, calling for steady increases in defence spending, a stronger European arms industry, and augmented strategic capabilities (*Michael Roth...*, 2024). Former

chair of this Bundestag committee, Christian Democrat Norbert Röttgen, agreed: soon Europe would have no choice but to defend itself – anything less would be tantamount to capitulation and surrender.

Trump's shocking comments came shortly after Scholz had returned from the US. The chancellor responded cautiously, vowing Germany would meet the 2% defence-spending target by 2024 and underlining NATO's core value: "It is fundamental to NATO that we stand up for each other and defend the territories of NATO members. We Germans also share responsibility for the security of the Baltic states and expect the same of the US," he said on 12 February 2024 at a press conference with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Berlin. Both leaders agreed Europe should markedly boost its defence capabilities, regardless of Trump's views (*Scholz says Trump...*, 2024).

Scholz repeated this call at the Munich Security Conference later that month, which was overshadowed by Trump's South Carolina remarks. "Europe needs to strengthen its self-defence capabilities to deter potential aggressors, regardless of who wins the upcoming US elections or how the war in Ukraine turns out. [...] It's important that we strengthen NATO's European pillar to show that we can defend every inch of the Alliance's territory", he said (*Speech by Federal Chancellor...*, 2024). This last sentence mirrored Biden's own "every inch" pledge and marked a "historic turning point" in the Social Democrats' stance on Germany's role in protecting its allies and Europe as a whole. It could almost be seen as a silver lining from Trump's outburst, were it not for the uncertainty it signalled for the future of transatlantic and US-German relations.

The televised Biden–Trump debate on 28 June 2024 marked a turning point in the battle for the White House, stirring deep concern in Germany. Biden's faltering performance, both physically and mentally, sealed the fate of Biden's re-election bid. German commentators echoed widespread Western anxiety over the likely outcome. Media coverage in Germany carried a clear undercurrent: Berlin was especially nervous about Trump's return. Top politicians in the traffic-light coalition kept notably quiet after Biden's poor showing, trying to avoid making waves.

Among politicians in the ruling coalition, and Scholz in particular, there was a sense of loyalty to President Biden, with whom relations had been very good, despite occasional tensions. When asked about Biden's condition, Scholz backed the president, warning it would be "a grave mistake" to underestimate him. "Having spoken with Biden, I can say that he is very focused and committed to what the President of the United States must do to lead the Alliance," he said, stressing Biden's dedication to the transatlantic partnership (Bazail-Eimil, 2024). Unspoken, but obvious, was the concern that the transatlantic alliance could face an uncertain future if Trump, who has consistently demonstrated his scepticism towards NATO and his opposition to continuing aid to Ukraine, prevails in the November election.

The US election campaign hung heavily over the NATO 75th anniversary summit in Washington on 9–11 July 2024, intended as a showcase of the Alliance's unity and resolve, especially on aid to Ukraine. Yet the chatter was dominated by President Biden's health. Even so, the summit proved unusually decisive, confirming Germany's growing commitment to NATO and European security. Several topics dominated the activities of the German delegation, led by the Chancellor, all directly or indirectly related to the war in Ukraine, the need to strengthen European security and maintain the Alliance's

standing. A few key decisions directly concerned Germany and its responsibility for the security of its allies.

One central decision was to reaffirm the establishment of a NATO command in Wiesbaden to coordinate Ukraine's training and arms supply, a job previously run by the US alone. This put Wiesbaden, alongside Ramstein, the largest US base in Europe, and Stuttgart, home to US European and African commands, in a vital role not only as a Ukraine aid hub, but also as the heart of Europe's defence system. It was no secret that the move was motivated by concerns over the consequences of Trump's possible return to power and the reduction of US presence in Europe and the Alliance.

Another big step taken during the NATO summit, agreed by Washington and Berlin, was to station US cruise missiles, with ranges of up to 2,500 km, including SM-6s, Tomahawks and hypersonic weapons, in Germany from 2026. For the first time since the Cold War, US weapons systems capable of hitting Russian territory would be based there. German experts put forth plenty of arguments justifying this agreement as part of a strategy to deter Russia. "We must be clear about which treaties Russia has broken, the arms it is building, and that Russian missiles in Kaliningrad can carry nuclear warheads and reach Germany," said Christoph Heusgen, head of the Munich Security Conference. Putin, he argued, has fully demonstrated his aggressive intentions and "it is only appropriate that we use this to inform our actions" (*Chancellor Scholz, 2024*).

In Washington, Chancellor Scholz struck a similar tone, pointing out that threats from Russia justified increases in NATO defence efforts, including the deployment of long-range weapons in Germany and shoring up NATO's eastern flank. Germany was already preparing to deploy a Bundeswehr brigade in Lithuania under the Vilnius NATO summit deal. "We are facing a different, aggressive Russia," Scholz declared. He emphasised that as NATO's largest European member, Germany has "a very special responsibility. And make no mistake: we can do this, we can live up to the task" (*Ibid.*). The Scholz government's earlier decision to purchase 600 Patriot missiles worth \$5 billion also fitted into this picture, boosting Germany's defence capabilities and its ability to deter enemies, but above all, being in line with NATO's defence plans. This was emphasised by the US Department of Defence when approving the sale of missiles to Germany in August 2024 (*USA genehmigen Verkauf..., 2024*).

Biden's first and only visit to Berlin on 17–18 October 2024 sealed the good cooperation deal between Scholz's cabinet and the US administration. Curiously, Germany had been conspicuously absent from Biden's travel schedule, not to mention "incidental" visits, despite being one of the United States' top allies in Europe and the biggest donor to Ukraine after the US. The visit, though just a working one and coming after Biden became a lame duck president and had dropped out of the presidential race on 21 July 2024, was solemn and rich in symbolism. Biden became only the second US president to receive Germany's highest honour, the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, the first recipient of it being George H. W. Bush, in office from 1989 to 1993, honoured for supporting the German reunification. Biden's medal was awarded for contributions "to German-American friendship and the transatlantic alliance." Presenting the award to Biden, President Steinmeier praised him for "restoring faith in the transatlantic alliance" and called him a "beacon of democracy" (*Sie sind ein Leuchtfieber..., 2024; Fischer, Kormbaki, 2024*).

President Biden, for his part, hailed Germany's resolve in adapting its policy to "stand firmly and unwaveringly by the side of Ukraine as the greatest supporter of a free Ukraine" in the face of Russian aggression. He described Germany as "America's closest and staunchest ally," particularly committed to defending democratic values (Angelos, Nöstlinger, 2024). Biden's visit to Berlin at the close of his presidency was, therefore, a gesture of appreciation, acknowledging Germany's role as a reliable partner of America, committed to both fulfilling its alliance obligations under the transatlantic agreement and to supporting Ukraine. At a time when Chancellor Scholz struggled with tensions within his coalition, such recognition from Washington created an illusion of effective support. In truth, however, the meeting in Berlin was one between two leaders whose political power, for all the authority of their offices, was constrained by the circumstances they faced.

For Germany, Trump's election victory on 5 November 2024 was the worst possible outcome, a worst-case scenario, which, although anticipated, had never been fully embraced in the hope that it would not come to pass (Daniels, 2024). Although officially denying their intention to interfere in the US election campaign, the "traffic light" coalition sided with Vice President Kamala Harris, who replaced Biden in the race for the White House. They realised that Harris's presidency would ensure strong transatlantic ties because, as Minister Baerbock put it referring to Harris's candidacy, "cooperation between Europe and the United States is paramount for our peace and security." In a similar vein, Link, Coordinator for Transatlantic Relations, stressed that Harris "would be closely tied to NATO, the European Union, and Germany" (*So beurteilen deutsche Politiker...*, 2024).

Although Trump's win was unwelcome, ruling coalition politicians moved quickly to congratulate him, pledge close cooperation with the United States, work to strengthen the transatlantic alliance, and assume greater responsibility for their own security and that of their allies. All this was done to pave the way for future relations with the new administration. Scholz assured that Germany would remain a reliable partner in the transatlantic alliance, adding that "Germany and the US are bonded by a partnership that evolved over many years." Baerbock too highlighted the importance of the transatlantic alliance, declaring that "Germany will be a close, reliable ally of the future US government" (*'The nightmare'...*, 2024).

Still, German politicians remained well aware that Trump's return to the White House would pose new challenges not only for Europe but also for Germany, which would need to shoulder a heavier security burden. "There is no point in complaining. Europe, including Germany, must now do more for peace, security and freedom on our continent. It will be costly and tiring. But in the end, we must grow up. The 'Mom America Hotel' days are over," said Roth (*Ibid.*). Friedrich Merz, leader of the opposition Christian Democratic Union, echoed this, arguing that shaping relations with the US "now depends in particular on us, Germans and Europeans. Europe must be able to conduct its own global policy, take responsibility for its own security, and strengthen its economies. Only an internally stable and externally united Europe can be an equal partner to the United States of America" (*Ibid.*).

Coinciding almost to the day with the announcement of the US election results, Germany's governing coalition collapsed on 6 November 2024. Scholz's government became history just when Trump's victory ushered in a new era in both US-European relations and Germany's transatlantic policy.

Summary

Formed after the 2021 elections, the SPD-Alliance 90/The Greens-FDP coalition government committed to stay the transatlantic course in Germany's foreign policy as its priority. In its coalition agreement, it stressed that "the transatlantic partnership and friendship with the United States are the main focus of our international activity." Nevertheless, the cabinet of Social Democrat Olaf Scholz had to prove itself to Washington. This was playing out against the backdrop of mounting tensions over Ukraine and Russia's subsequent full-scale invasion, which forced the "traffic light" coalition into taking a string of unprecedented steps. Even the SPD, traditionally more cautious about close alignment with Washington, shifted towards a more pro-American stance, increasing involvement in NATO, and joining its allies in aiding Ukraine. Among both the ruling coalition and the Christian Democratic opposition, there has been a clear rise in recognition of the security role of the transatlantic alliance.

An emblematic example of this new course of Germany's foreign and defence policy was the "historic turning point" announced by Chancellor Scholz in response to Russia's assault on Ukraine. The announcement of an unprecedented defence spending hike and a break from *Russlandpolitik*, the halting of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, and a firm pledge of military aid to Ukraine, met the expectations clearly relayed from Washington to Berlin. The *Zeitenwende* declarations guided Joe Biden administration's approach to Germany and to Chancellor Scholz personally as a key European partner. Equally notable was Germany's growing support for Ukraine and it becoming the second-largest overall donor to Ukraine after the US.

That said, the Biden administration did at times chide Berlin for its sluggish deployment of some aspects of the *Zeitenwende*, particularly its hesitance to supply certain types of weapons to Ukraine. Against this background, it is worth noting Chancellor Scholz's trademark tactic of taking "well-thought-out NATO-coordinated actions" to justify Germany's refusal to provide Ukraine with, for example, offensive weapons that could be used against Russia on its soil, possibly leading to an escalation of conflict. In fact, the Biden administration also feared that such escalation might spark a Russia-NATO confrontation, and yet the US drew its red lines much further out than Scholz. United by the same anxiety over Russia's reaction, both leaders agreed at the 2023 NATO summit to oppose setting out a roadmap for Ukraine's NATO membership, leaving Kyiv deeply disappointed. Overall, however, the US-German relationship remained solid, as confirmed by regular diplomatic contacts and visits to the US by senior German officials.

By 2024, the transatlantic policy of the Scholz government was already being shaped by the looming prospect of Donald Trump returning to the White House. Bracing for this "worst-case scenario," Germany ramped up its diplomatic outreach to Trump's inner circle while urging its European allies to bolster support for Ukraine and strengthen European security. Germany deepened its role on NATO's eastern flank and made new commitments at the NATO Washington summit. Biden's visit to Berlin in October 2024, just before his term ended, signalled US recognition of Germany's growing clout within the transatlantic community.

As it soon turned out, these proved to be the final weeks of the "traffic light" coalition government, which collapsed the day after Trump's election victory. However, the Scholz cabinet's overall record of dealings with both the Biden administration and the broader

transatlantic community, was positive. Germany had proved itself to be a dependable ally, giving comprehensive support to Ukraine, and ranking second only to the US in total aid to Kyiv, although, as the Christian Democratic opposition pointed out, more of it could have come sooner. However, the “traffic light” coalition worked tirelessly to build credibility and standing in both Washington and the transatlantic alliance, undoubtedly spurred on by a keen awareness of the growing threats to German and European security.

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Transatlantyczka polityka gabinetu Olafa Scholza (2021–2025)

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono transatlantyczną politykę rządu Olafa Scholza (2021–2025), rozumianą jako relacje z USA oraz zaangażowanie Niemiec w ramach NATO. Starano się znaleźć odpowiedź na pytanie, jak zmieniła się ta polityka pod wpływem wojny w Ukrainie i związanych z tym rosnących zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa Niemiec i Europy. W tym celu analizie poddano relacje między gabinetem Scholza a administracją Joe Bidena, próbując określić pola współpracy i punkty sporu. Starano się także odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy Niemcy sprawdzili się jako wiarygodny sojusznik w ramach NATO. W konkluzji można stwierdzić, że bilans gabinetu Scholza zarówno w relacjach z administracją amerykańską, jak i we wspólnocie transatlantycznej wypadł dodatnio. Niemcy sprawdzili się również jako odpowiedzialny sojusznik, udzielając Ukrainie wszechstronnego wsparcia i stając się drugim po USA darczyńcą pomocy dla Kijowa.

Slowa kluczowe: Niemcy, Stany Zjednoczone, NATO, kanclerz Olaf Scholz, prezydent Joseph Biden, polityka transatlantyczka

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