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Crisis and Change in Post-*Zeitenwende* German Security Policy

Dirk Nabers · Frank A. Stengel 

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Abstract This article examines the nexus between crisis and change in the context of German security policy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s announcement of a *Zeitenwende* (historic turning point) on 27 February 2022, a few days after the Russian attack, suggests a substantial change in German foreign and security policy. Germany’s reorientation has renewed the debate about change and continuity in German foreign and security policy (notably regarding antimilitarism). Particularly prominent in the discourse is the notion of crisis, which this paper specifically focuses on. We ask first, at a theoretical level, how we can best understand the conceptual nexus between crisis and foreign policy change and second, empirically, how crisis and change are connected in the specific case of the German *Zeitenwende*. In the attempt to analyze the link between crisis and foreign policy change, we propose that understanding how once-unthinkable policies are made possible requires that we turn our attention to dynamics of discursive change. We illustrate the argument with a mixed-methods analysis of German parliamentary debates between 1987 and 2023.

Keywords Crisis · Foreign policy change · Discourse analysis · Knowledge production · Germany · Corpus linguistics

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Krise und Wandel in der deutschen Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik nach der Zeitenwende

Zusammenfassung Dieser Artikel untersucht den Zusammenhang zwischen Krise und Wandel im Kontext der deutschen Sicherheitspolitik nach der Zeitenwende. Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz' Ankündigung einer Zeitenwende am 27. Februar 2022, wenige Tage nach der russischen Invasion der Ukraine, deutet auf einen weitreichenden Wandel in der deutschen Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik hin. Diese Neuorientierung hat die Debatte über Wandel und Kontinuität in der deutschen Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik neu entfacht. Besonders hervorstechend im Diskurs ist der Begriff der Krise, auf den sich dieser Beitrag speziell konzentriert. Wir fragen zunächst auf theoretischer Ebene, wie wir den konzeptuellen Zusammenhang zwischen Krise und außenpolitischem Wandel am besten verstehen können, und zweitens empirisch, wie Krise und Wandel im spezifischen Fall der deutschen Zeitenwende miteinander verbunden sind. Zu einem Verständnis des Zusammenhangs zwischen Krise und Wandel ist eine Analyse von Diskursen unverzichtbar. Wir veranschaulichen das Argument mit einer Mixed-Methods-Analyse der deutschen Parlamentsdebatten zwischen 1987 und 2023.

Schlüsselwörter Krise · Politikwandel · Diskursanalyse · Wissensproduktion · Deutsche Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik · Korpuslinguistik

1 Introduction

This article examines the nexus between crisis and change in the context of German security policy after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Three days after the attack on 24 February 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that it marked a *Zeitenwende* (literally “turn of the times,” i.e., a turning point) for security on the European continent and announced a far-reaching reorientation of German foreign and security policy. Germany would do “what[ever] is needed to secure the peace in Europe” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1352). Since then, Scholz has doubled down on his initial statement, for instance calling the development an “epochal tectonic shift” in a 2023 article in *Foreign Affairs* (Scholz 2023, p. 22; cf. also Scholz 2024). Scholz not only announced significant investments in defense but also called for awareness that Germany must, as Scholz put it in 2023, become “the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be” (Scholz 2023, p. 22). The federal government has taken substantive steps toward that goal, announcing—among other things—the delivery of weapons to Ukraine that, according to the government, marks a break with the post-WWII taboo on arms exports to conflict zones.¹ Since the *Zeitenwende* speech, Berlin has delivered a gradually increasing number of weapons systems to Ukraine, even including Leopard 2 main battle tanks.² In addition, the government

¹ In spite of this proclaimed taboo, German governments have, in fact, in the past delivered weapons to third countries involved in armed conflicts (cf. Stahl 2017; Wisotzki 2020).

² In absolute numbers, Germany has become one of Ukraine's largest supporters (Trebesch et al. 2023).

created a €100 billion special fund for investments into the force readiness of the *Bundeswehr* (German armed forces) and declared the intent to meet the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) goal of continuously investing 2% of the German gross domestic product into defense (Keller 2022). In June 2023, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced plans to permanently station an armored brigade in Lithuania (Fischer 2024).

These developments have sparked a renewed debate about change and continuity in German foreign and security policy (cf. Blumenau 2022; Bunde 2022; Dück and Stahl 2023; Eberle 2023; Fröhlich 2023; Giegerich and Schreer 2023; Glaab 2023; Kamp 2023; Mader and Schoen 2023; Major and Mölling 2022; Mello 2023; Riemann and Löffmann 2023; Serpa da Silva 2023; Tallis 2022; Tkocz and Stritzel 2023). As far as explanation is concerned, the predominant interpretation appears to be that the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine represented an external shock or crisis that triggered a policy shift. Indeed, policymakers themselves claimed that the invasion marked a “turning point,” after which “the world is not the same anymore as it was before.” With the invasion of Ukraine, Scholz claimed, Putin had “created a new reality. This new reality requires a clear response” (Scholz 2022b, pp. 1350, 1351), including, as Scholz claimed in the 2023 article mentioned above, the development of “a new strategic culture” (Scholz 2023, p. 28; cf. also Federal Ministry of Defence 2023, p. 6). Similarly, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party’s (SPD) parliamentary group, Rolf Mützenich, explicitly referred to the *Zeitenwende* as an “existential crisis” creating new realities for German defense (Mützenich 2022, p. 1366).

In a similar vein, academic studies stress that the “crisis,” “shock,” or “rupture” of the invasion triggered, was expected to trigger, or could trigger change, in terms of either foreign policy beliefs, public opinion, or substantive foreign policy (e.g., Biba 2024; Bunde 2022; Dück and Stahl 2023; Glaab 2023; Mader and Schoen 2023; Mello 2023; O’Neal 2024).³ This expectation is informed by the theoretical assumption, common among foreign policy researchers more broadly, that crises or “external shocks” as objective conditions cause far-reaching policy change (Hermann 1990, p. 12; for a recent overview, cf. Haesebrouck and Joly 2021). What exactly constitutes such a crisis and how it leads to policy change, however, remains mostly undertheorized. Given that constructivist and poststructuralist studies have shown crises to be socially constructed or discursively produced (cf. Klopff 2023; Klopff and Nabers 2024; Nabers 2015, 2019; Widmaier et al. 2007), taking them for granted *de facto* brackets much of the politics involved in foreign policy decision-making. The social construction of crises is also clearly visible in the case of the *Zeitenwende*. After all, Russia’s war against Ukraine began in 2014 with its annexation of Crimea and occupation of territory in Eastern Ukraine, not in 2022 (Davies 2023). Still, only the full-scale invasion was constructed as a crisis sufficient for a substantial rethink of German security policy (Blumenau 2022, p. 16).⁴

³ A notable exception, if outside IR, is Bisiada’s (2023) analysis of Scholz’s construction of the *Zeitenwende* as a turning point.

⁴ Moreover, the Russian invasion does not seem to be recognized as a turning point throughout the global South (Plagemann 2022).

Against this background, this article systematically explores the role of crisis in the German *Zeitenwende* discourse. We argue that understanding crisis as some form of external shock that causes change does not adequately capture what is going on. We propose an alternative discourse theoretical framework that we argue allows us to make sense of the social and political dynamics of the German *Zeitenwende* in a more adequate way. Instead of understanding crisis as a temporary disruption of an otherwise stable society (including foreign policy), we argue that crisis should be understood as constitutive of society. We draw on the discourse theoretical perspective of the so-called Essex School (cf. Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Laclau 2005; in international relations, e.g., Diez 1999; Doty 1996; Eberle 2019; Herschinger 2011; Methmann and Rothe 2012; Nabers 2015; Nabers and Stengel 2019; Nymalm 2020; Solomon 2014; Stengel 2020) to understand foreign policy change through the central concepts of *sedimented practices*, *dislocation*, *antagonism*, and *hegemony*. Importantly, we propose to understand crises not as temporary disruptions of otherwise stable practices; rather, we use the notion of dislocation to draw attention to the chronic disruption of the social. Change, we will argue, is not the exception but the rule, and becomes graspable only through the analysis of above mentioned four interconnected concepts. We illustrate the analytical benefit of our framework with an analysis of German parliamentary debates on the *Zeitenwende*.

The paper is structured as follows: In the subsequent section we broaden the view beyond the emerging literature on the German *Zeitenwende* to capture how crises are generally conceptualized in the social science literature and in international relations (IR) and foreign policy analysis more specifically. This is followed by a summary of our theoretical framework that focuses on the dynamics of discursive change. The framework is substantiated by a brief outline of the methodical framework of the study, which combines a quantitative corpus linguistic analysis with an in-depth theory-guided discourse analysis of a subsection of the documents in a mixed-methods design. To situate the developments after the Russian invasion in the broader context of postunification German security policy, the quantitative analysis includes all security–political debates from before German unification (the beginning of the 11th legislative period in 1987) until Chancellor Scholz’s speech in the German Bundestag reflecting on 1 year of the *Zeitenwende*. This allows us to analyze the construction of, for example, Russia over time, including important events such as the end of the Cold War, Putin’s ascent to office, the war against Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea, and the intervention in Syria. In a nutshell, the analysis shows that in contrast to initial expectations that the *Zeitenwende* would usher in radical change, and potentially even liberate Germany from its traditional hesitance (Blumenau 2022; Kamp 2023), change has been much more modest, gradual, and halting—and controversially debated with every step. The conclusion sums up and discusses our findings.

2 Crisis and Change in the Social Science Literature

In the social science literature, crises are often treated as objective phenomena with a causal effect on policy, such as causing instability or triggering change (Fleis-

cher and Parrado 2010; Nabers 2015, 2019). In IR and foreign policy analysis more specifically, crisis is most often associated with perceptual change or altering decision-making contents and style (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1982). Against this background, a number of scholars have attempted to delineate crisis as a concept (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2020; Bray and Mclean 2015). In the following, we argue that these attempts at concept specification suffer from a number of shortcomings that hamper the use of crisis as an analytical concept for empirical, and in particular comparative, research. Overall, three main problems continue to affect the current conceptual literature on crises: First, and most generally, crisis is reduced to crisis perception. For instance, as Charles Hermann influentially claimed, a crisis refers to “a situation that (1) threatens high-priority goals of the decision-making unit, (2) restricts the amount of time available for response before the decision is transformed, and (3) surprises the members of the decision-making unit by its occurrence” (Hermann 1969). Quite typically, goals and capacities of actors are focused here, while nothing is said about the social reality, temporality, and materiality of crisis implied in this quote.

Second, existing approaches at times conflate different ontologies, i.e., different understandings of what kind of a “thing” crises are. While crisis is sometimes seen as a social construction (Bösch et al. 2020; Weldes 1999; Widmaier 2007), some authors do not commit to one specific ontology, defining crisis as “a notion, condition and experience” (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2020, p. 1). However, this confronts us with three different ontological perspectives—conceptual, physical, and mental. If, furthermore, it is “both concept and event,” all three perspectives must by implication be united either in the moment of the “event” or in the “concept,” while it is not obvious at all what both terms denote and how far an event circumscribes an occurrence that exists independently of an observer’s mind, or whether a concept is entirely produced within the mind—and if so, whose constructions are relevant for a crisis to be seen as a crisis and for foreign policy change to occur. A concept of discourse that unites all these different ontologies therefore seems particularly fruitful for analyzing foreign policy change.

Third, there is a more specific philosophical point of critique that applies to sociologically inspired transdisciplinary work that treats crises as external to society, arguing that societies are *confronted* with all kinds of different crises (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2020, p. 2; Walby 2015).⁵ Put simply, crises are conceived as having a materiality that is independent of whether they are acknowledged, and they are represented as temporary interruptions of an otherwise more or less regulated and stable society instead of a constant feature of social relations. Understood this way, stability, not change, is the theoretical normality. A prominent and representative definition thus states the following:

“A crisis is defined here as an event that has the potential to cause a large detrimental change to the social system and in which there is lack of proportionality between cause and consequence. Crises are both ‘real’, in the sense of actual

⁵ Bergman Rosamond et al. refer to “the various kinds of crises with which contemporary societies struggle.”

changes in social processes, and socially constructed, in the sense that different interpretations of the crisis have implications for its outcome. The interpretation of a crisis may under- or over-state its magnitude and impact, as well as attribute blame as to its cause” (Walby 2015, p. 14).

A closer examination of this initially plausible claim gives rise to a series of theoretical as well as practically relevant questions that are, in fact, quite fundamental to our understanding of crisis but are nevertheless left unanswered, circulating around the problematic notions of the event, social change, and interpretation: What is an event? How do we best understand an event in both its temporal and spatial implications? What does it mean for an event to be real, and what is the precise relationship between event and political construction? Is there a clear causal link between a crisis (as event) and policy change? As will be illustrated in the following, crisis makes sense only if it constitutes society in a fundamental way, if society is understood through the lens of crisis. If society experienced no crisis, we would live in a seemingly perfect yet impossible totalitarian place without conflict or change. This means that crises are central for any notion of society and that politics unremittingly constitutes society anew by addressing the numerous smaller and larger crises that societies entail. Such an understanding of crisis as *ontologically constitutive* does not, aside from a few exceptions (cf. Nabers 2015, 2019; Klopff 2023), play a role in IR. It is this understanding that we advocate in the remainder of the article.

3 Toward a Theory of Crisis and Foreign Policy Change

If we want to gain a better understanding of the temporality and spatiality of crisis, and thus its connection to foreign policy change, it might be wise to inquire into what exactly might be “in crisis” in the first place. It is the situation of societal deficiency that perhaps comes closest to the understanding of crisis proposed here: Social as well as political transformation is deeply rooted in crisis, and vice versa. Irrespective of the casualties and the massive suffering that they cause, catastrophes such as war, violent conflicts, wildfires, floods, and viruses become *politically* salient because of a fundamental, constitutive social—and concurrently political—instability in which they are articulated. In other words, an event can sometimes have massive material effects but be politically articulated as irrelevant. It is in this sense that a discursive *ontology of crisis* can enable us to analyze crisis at the ontic or empirical level. Against this background, the nexus between crisis and the transformation of political practice can be depicted as follows:

1. *Sedimented practices*: Our fundamental theoretical assumption is an imperfect and necessarily unstable social structure. Stability represents the exception, not the rule, and becomes graspable only through the depiction of repetitive forms of behavior, consisting of so-called sedimented practices or discourses (Laclau 1990). Sedimented discourses denote stabilized, often institutionalized, forms of collective human behavior around which communication becomes possible in the first

place: traditions, routines, rituals, accepted knowledge, notions of morality, institutions, etc., and also standardized forms of acting and speaking. They resemble a trail that is walked repeatedly and therefore leaves visible traces. This closely corresponds to what Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 106, italics removed) refer to as “social logics.” In the case of Germany, this includes, for instance, what constructivists refer to as Germany’s antimilitarist culture that (together with multilateralism and Western integration) has gained ground since the end of WWII, but it continues to be contested and is hence apt to change (cf. Berger 1998).

2. *Dislocation*: Talking about crisis in this context means the “dislocation” of sedimented practices, by questioning the stability and rationality of political means, which in themselves have never been stable but are contingent and essentially always unbalanced (Laclau 1990, p. 39). A sedimented discourse resembles a beaten path that offers safety and credibility, as it has proven its worth, but which may well be abandoned at times. But contrary to the prevalent crisis literature, sedimented practices are not simply disrupted and vanish (the path is not simply abandoned) but, rather, are rearticulated to legitimate specific policy changes—and might resurface when the next potentially controversial decision is to be made. Following Nabers (2019), we consider two dimensions of dislocation particularly crucial for an analysis of foreign policy change: First, dislocation indicates what might be called *translocation*, and second, it implies *disarticulation*. Translocation refers to a situation in which a signifier that is seen as alien to a particular discourse enters and destabilizes the internal structure of that discourse. A good example is the signifier “terrorism,” which was articulated as foreign to the very identity of the United States after September 11, 2001, and was still able to infiltrate and contaminate an otherwise allegedly stable American discourse that had previously been built around notions such as freedom, prosperity, stability, and progress.⁶ While translocation destabilizes a purportedly secure and homogeneous social formation, which is then in need of reorganization, disarticulation refers to the disruption of the internal logic of the articulatory process. It can be compared to *trauma*, i.e., a situation that is hard to describe and yet demands to be communicated, resembling speechlessness, void, and disorientation. Articulation becomes more difficult, if not impossible. Sometimes new terms have to be invented to justify a particular policy. These two forms of dislocation have to be distinguished from what Klopff and Nabers (2024, p. 6) call “ephemeral dislocation.” Ephemeral dislocation refers to a “*discursively articulated destabilization*” of a discourse, “a state of overt instability” (ibid.), for instance when discourse participants claim that a certain situation represents a crisis that requires radical policy change.
3. *Antagonism*: The social rests on the interplay of two logics: The “logic of equivalence” constitutes the fullness of a community by linking together a number of unfulfilled but previously disparate demands within a society (e.g., clean water; investments in infrastructure after a natural disaster; control of migration, security, and peace), while the “logic of difference” contradicts equivalential logics by stressing the difference of individual groups and their demands (Laclau 1996,

⁶ For an in-depth analysis, cf. Nabers (2015).

p. 39). Different, previously disparate demands and identities appear equivalent (as “going hand in hand”) through the construction of an antagonistic frontier between unfulfilled demands on one hand and an obstacle (the antagonistic Other) that blocks their realization and, symbolically, the chance to reach a fully constituted, undisrupted identity (Nonhoff 2019, p. 81; Solomon 2014) on the other. Because all of these demands are blocked by the same Other, they are united in their common goal to overcome the obstacle.

4. *Hegemony*: Over time, the discourse becomes what Laclau calls a hegemonic discourse, “not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object” (Laclau 1990, p. 64). Hegemony refers to both the process by which a particular discourse becomes established as an—or even the only (universal)—acceptable representation of reality and the status of having become such a dominant discourse. Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 106) refer to this as “political logics,” i.e., the way by which new routines, institutions, and so on are established. The materialization of hegemonic discourses represents an exercise of power in its strongest form, as it categorically excludes alternative institutional frameworks and sometimes gains long-term stability. It is precisely this form of hegemonic politics that we will try to unveil by scrutinizing German foreign and security policy after the *Zeitenwende* was declared by the German chancellor. Over time, a discourse, or parts of it, can become sedimented (turned into social logics), hiding their conditions of emergence as the product of past political struggles and instead becoming accepted as quasinatural (Eberle 2019). Each element of the model constitutes and permeates all the others: Sedimented practices never represent the social in its entirety; they are always internally incomplete and dislocated. Similarly, equivalence never gains an absolute or finished character in that it leads to an eternal closure of society through (foreign) policy practices; difference continues to destabilize equivalential relationships.

4 Methodical Considerations

The analysis employs a mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative corpus linguistic analysis with theoretical illustration and plausibilization (cf. Glasze 2007; Klopff 2023; Nabers 2015; Wiertz et al. 2023). As a first step, we employ corpus linguistic approaches to analyze frequency as well as typical connotations of dominant signifiers in our text corpus. The corpus used for the analysis will have to circumscribe sets of text that can be assigned to a specific corpus of articulations—in our case, parliamentary debates on German foreign and security policy between 1987 (the beginning of the 11th legislative period) and 2023 (the 1-year anniversary of the *Zeitenwende*). This time period encompasses German unification, which is commonly seen as a turning point in German security policy (notably also with respect to Russia). Some years saw a high number of debates on the topic of security policy, while in other years nonsecurity issues dominated the agenda. Parliamentary debates are a useful source because they include not only official governmental statements by the federal chancellor and other cabinet ministers but also statements

by the parliamentary opposition, which allows us to trace whether and how meaning is contested between and within different political parties (Stahl 2017; Raunio and Wagner 2020). At the same time, it makes it possible to see how positions change over time, including how potential new collective interpretations of “reality” emerge and how foreign policy goals are explained, arms deliveries legitimized, suffering lamented, and opponents accused.

Our corpus includes all debates concerned with security policy, selected based on the tables of contents of parliamentary protocols published by the German Bundestag. This broad corpus will make it possible to analyze apparent continuities and breaks in foreign policy discourses, to scrutinize sedimented practices, and to study dislocated differential structures, antagonistic relationships, and hegemonic struggles. For this purpose, AntConc, a multiplatform freeware concordance program, was used (Anthony 2024). AntConc provides helpful tools for lexicometric analyses, the most important being *concordance*, which allows for the analysis of how words and phrases are regularly used in a corpus of texts; *clusters*, which show word constellations based on the specification of the search; *collocates*, which provide the researcher with a tool to scrutinize nonsequential patterns in language; and, finally, *word list*, which counts all the words in the corpus and produces an ordered list to facilitate the search. The lexicometric analysis is complemented by theoretical plausibilization based on a more in-depth interpretive discourse analysis.⁷ For that purpose, we created several temporal subcorpora, based on previous research on change in German foreign policy: the first from 1987 to 2000, in order to be able to look at the period before the “war on terror” and incorporating the end of the Cold War and German unification; the second from 1987 to 2007, to classify the period before the Russian–Georgian war that broke out in 2008; the third from 1987 to 2013, with the aim of analyzing German security policy before the annexation of Crimea; and finally a corpus covering the period after the annexation of Crimea until 2023. The evaluation of subcorpora facilitates the analysis of breaks and continuity and makes comparisons possible. Corpora organized by individual years complete our dataset.

5 *Zeitenwende* and German Security Policy

5.1 Sedimented Practices

History plays a crucial role when it comes to sedimented practices and their connection with contemporary security policies. Dislocation becomes visible when formerly credible practices are either articulated as insufficient or when entirely new policies are called for. The statistical analysis shows that in German parliamentary debates between 1987 and 2022, security is usually coupled with freedom, peace, democracy, the rule of law, and human dignity, establishing a logic of equivalence between

⁷ On discourse analytical methodology and methods as well as interpretive research design more broadly, cf. Glynos and Howarth (2007), Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), Nabers (2015), Nonhoff (2006), and Stengel (2020).

these terms. This is broadly in line with the established traditions of German foreign policy, often summed up under the heading of a “civilian power” (Harnisch and Maull 2001). Typical clusters identified by the corpus linguistic analysis include “taking responsibility for freedom and security” (Lindner 2022, p. 1834), “bearing responsibility for peace, freedom and security” (Otte 2014, p. 2396), “freedom and democracy in Europe” (Brantner 2022, p. 7833), and “Europe, a place of freedom and the rule of law” (Schockenhoff 2013, p. 27036), as well as “freedom and the dignity of the individual” (Merkel 2014a, p. 570).

More specifically with respect to Russia, since the government of Chancellor Willy Brandt (Social Democratic Party [SPD]) and his new *Ostpolitik*, Germany has pursued a policy of rapprochement, seeking to deepen economic interdependence with the goal of facilitating political change (*Wandel durch Handel*) and to function as a bridge between the West and Russia (Blumenau 2022; Fix 2021). Thus, after the breakdown of the Berlin Wall Russia was mainly articulated as a potential or actual partner, not a competitor or threat. A collocates analysis of parliamentary debates between 1987 and 2014 (before the annexation of Crimea) clearly shows the strong association of Russia with partnership (Table 1). The noun that most often appears near “russ*” (Russia, Russian) in German parliamentary discourse before the annexation is “partnership,” with speakers regularly stressing the need to work with Russia as a partner.⁸

Both Russia and Ukraine gained significance only after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, although the comparatively low extent of interest in the two countries is still remarkable (Fig. 1). It appears as if the annexation of the Crimean peninsula—the “Crimea crisis” (Steinmeier 2014, p. 2654), as it was referred to—was not seen as serious enough to warrant sustained attention in security–political debates. There is a noticeable increase in interest in the conflict, but this flattens out again quite quickly after 2014.

After the end of the Cold War, a new German security discourse had emerged that described the security environment as marked by “new threats”—a set of loosely connected phenomena ranging from armed conflict within states and state failure

Table 1 Top ten collocates of “russ*” before the Crimea crisis

Rank	Collocate
1	China
2	Russia
3	NATO
4	USA
5	Ukraine
6	With
7	Council
8	India
9	Partnership
10	And

⁸ We used the standard setting of five words to the left and right and sorted the results according to their frequency.

to environmental destruction to mass migration to organized crime, piracy, and terrorism. Because these phenomena were globalized and not primarily military in nature, German policymakers argued, they required a broader “comprehensive” or “networked” approach that brought together the means by different military and civilian state and nonstate actors to tackle them early on and at their place of origin. During the 1990s and 2000s, German security policy was very much in line with the liberal interventionist zeitgeist, primarily concerned with these “new” or “asymmetric” threats. Military operations outside the NATO area had become the *Bundeswehr*’s primary task, and the armed forces had undergone a series of reforms to adapt them to that changed mission spectrum (cf. Baumann and Hellmann 2001; Stengel 2020; Zimmermann 2023).

In line with this broad understanding of the post–Cold War security environment, the annexation of Crimea and occupation of territory by Russian forces and separatists in 2014 was originally interpreted as an intrastate conflict. For instance, on 13 March 2014, Norbert Spinrath (SPD) demanded that “[f]rom now on, Russia and the [European Union] have to pull in the same direction: to avoid a civil war in Ukraine” (Spinrath 2014, p. 1539). A week later, 2 days after the Russian annexation of Crimea, Member of Parliament (MP) Thorsten Frei (Christian Democratic Union [CDU]) argued that despite the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, “the biggest security political challenges of the 21st century” still originated with “the weak and fragile” states, not with the strong and big ones (Frei 2014, p. 1843). The interpretation of the conflict not as a traditional interstate war but as an intrastate conflict continued to influence the German debate. Thus, in May 2014 Frithjof Schmidt (The Greens) expressed worries about a potential “military escalation in Ukraine, about civil war and war in Europe,” and other MPs also used the term “civil war” to describe the situation in Ukraine (Schmidt 2014, p. 2663). In a speech during the same debate, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) described the armed

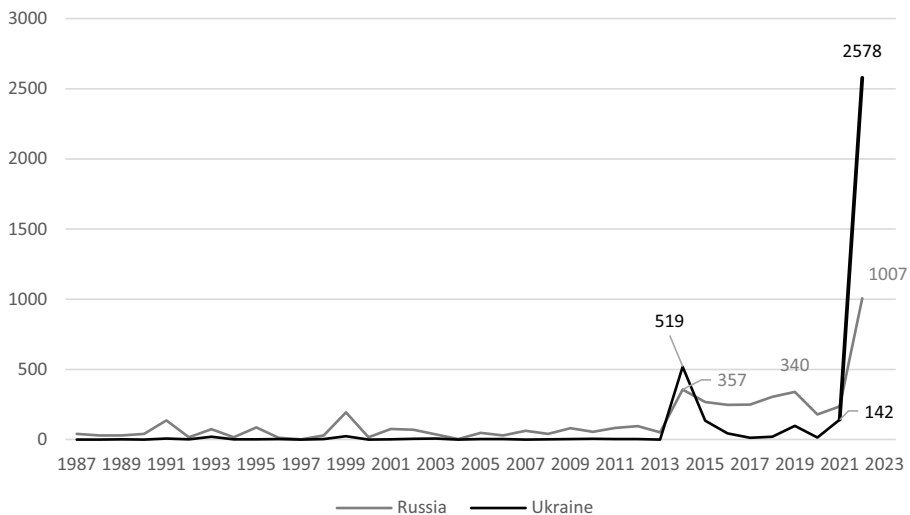


Fig. 1 Mentions of Russia and Ukraine in German Bundestag debates, 1987–2023

conflict as clashes between Ukrainian forces and “pro-Russian separatists” and expressed worries that Russian forces deployed at the Ukrainian border might “cross the border” (Steinmeier 2014, p. 2652). Thus, the conflict was largely constructed as an intra-Ukrainian matter that could still escalate into an interstate war. Steinmeier’s statement is remarkable because Russian special forces had in fact been present in Crimea since February 2014, together with pro-Russian separatists blockading and occupying military bases, airports, and government buildings (Freedman 2014). In April 2014, the *New York Times* had already reported about the direct involvement of Russian troops (Higgins et al. 2014). Still, during the same speech Steinmeier lauded Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe inspectors for debunking what he called “rumors” about Russian troops having been involved in the “Crimea crisis” from “the very beginning” (Steinmeier 2014, p. 2654). Knowledge about the Russian involvement in the conflict apparently had either not made it to the top of the Foreign Office or was deliberately being ignored.⁹ During that same debate, MP Florian Hahn (CDU/Christian Social Union [CSU]) voiced suspicion of Russia’s role in the conflict, arguing that it was “remarkable how well equipped and trained the separatists are.” Still, he did not claim that these were in fact, at least in part, Russian troops either. Instead of calling for a Russian troop withdrawal, Hahn claimed that “Russia can do much more” to diffuse the situation (Hahn 2014, p. 2663). In sum, Russia was constructed not as the aggressor but as a third party that could help resolve the conflict. This representation arguably contributed to the relatively quick return to business as (more or less) usual in German–Russian relations.

This representation of the conflict influenced which policy solutions were considered adequate to deal with the situation. Given the representation of the conflict as an intra-Ukrainian matter, Steinmeier called for a “national dialogue” and stressed that the most important goal was to “avoid an escalation” (Steinmeier 2014, p. 2653). Like Chancellor Angela Merkel, Steinmeier explicitly rejected a “military solution,” which corresponded well to antimilitarist sedimented practices (Steinmeier 2014, p. 2652). Member of Parliament Wolfgang Gehrcke (Left Party) even demanded that Germany exert pressure on the Ukrainian (instead of the Russian) leadership not to deploy armed forces against, as he put it, “its own people” (Gehrcke 2014, p. 2654). Although one cannot know how this counterfactual would have played out, it stands to reason to assume that an acknowledgement of what was *de facto* an armed attack on a sovereign nation would have required that the German government demand that Russia cease its offensive operations.

In addition to not being clearly identified as a conflict party, Russia was consistently articulated as an honest partner for dialogue, despite available evidence to the contrary. This points to the continued relevance of Germany’s self-image as a bridge between the West and Russia. For instance, in the above cited speech, Steinmeier also describes how he tried to reason with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov about the claim that Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, who had been ousted after a violent crackdown on the Euromaidan protests (Freedman 2014; see online appendix), fell victim to a far-right coup. Steinmeier recounted how he tried to con-

⁹ Recently Distler and Tekath (2023) have shown a similar neglect by the Foreign Office of local knowledge with regard to Mali, which they argue is at least in part due to a passive information-gathering process.

vince Lavrov that given these suspicions the Russian government should have an interest in smooth Ukrainian elections (Steinmeier 2014, p. 2652). This would make sense if one assumes that Lavrov's concerns were genuine. There is, however, good reason to assume that this narrative was Russian disinformation deliberately spread to undermine the opposition and the new government, just like the full-scale invasion was justified with the false claim that the operation aimed to denazify Ukraine (Gelashvili 2023). As in the case of the claim that Russia was not directly involved in Crimea, here the Kremlin's claims are taken for granted—despite a long history of Soviet and Russian disinformation regarding Ukrainian nationalism.

Having said that, the lexicometric analysis does unveil a notable shift in terms of how Russia is articulated in German parliamentary discourse after the annexation of Crimea. As noted above, before 2014 Russia was mainly associated with the notion of partnership. After the annexation of Crimea, the term “partnership” disappeared not only from the top ten but from the top 100 collocates of “russ*” (Table 2). Following the annexation of Crimea, Germany's stance oscillated between the fundamental principle of cooperation and the impossibility of already actively pursuing new political paths. What we notice here is a form of *disarticulation*: Previously articulated meanings collapse and remain nondescript but are not yet replaced by new ones. Nevertheless, the dislocation of foreign policy practices is an ongoing feature of foreign policy change. In the context of Russian direct military involvement in the Donbas, individual MPs such as Anton Hofreiter (The Greens) and Gernot Erler (SPD) began talking about Russia's actions in terms of “aggression” (Hofreiter 2014, p. 4427; Erler 2017, p. 23290), even though that did not yet materialize in a shift of the overall discourse.¹⁰

Table 2 Top ten collocates of “russ*” before and after the annexation of Crimea

Rank	Before the annexation of Crimea	After the annexation of Crimea
1	China	Ukraine
2	Russia	USA
3	NATO	China
4	USA	Federation (Russian Federation)
5	Ukraine	Crimea
6	With	With
7	Council	NATO
8	India	Founding Act (NATO–Russia Founding Act)
9	Partnership	Side (the Russian side)
10	And	Russia

¹⁰ In contrast to that, members of the far right AfD such as Hansjörg Müller (2018, p. 1802) reproached critics of Russia with “anti-Russian rhetoric,” speaking about the annexation of Crimea being only “allegedly contrary to international law” and an “allegedly persistent Russian aggression in Ukraine,” and claimed that the Euromaidan has been a “coup” against Ukrainian President Yanukovich “organized and financed” by the West.

It appears that German sedimented practices regarding Russia proved rather stable over time, in spite of the “Crimea crisis,” the Kremlin’s larger “Novorossia project” (the attempts to turn people in the occupied territories against the government in Kyiv), and even Moscow’s attempt to use force in support for separatists, trying to destabilize Ukraine (Allan 2020, p. 5; cf. Finkel 2024). Although policymakers did point out that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a clear breach of international law, at least on the surface German security discourse appeared marked more by continuity than change. Let us therefore focus more thoroughly on the interplay between sedimented and dislocating practices.

5.2 Dislocation

Dislocation is constitutive of any form of subjectivity. It is all-pervading and ongoing, visible through recurring forms of disarticulation and translocation. Within the social quite generally, but certainly also in the case of German foreign and security policy, we see that certain meanings are permanently fused with new practices. This includes, for example, that different countries become the main focus of German foreign policy during different periods of time and that previous articulations are connected in new discourses. While the 1990s were dominated by the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan unsurprisingly appeared in 2001, dominating security-related debates in the German Bundestag in the years to come. Before 2007, the year preceding the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008, Russia appeared only marginally in these debates, while Ukraine played almost no role at all.

Although rising attention is given to Russia after 2007, even after the outbreak of the Russian–Georgian war in 2008 Russia is still of minor importance in the overall picture (Figs. 1 and 2). In the corpus used for our analysis, we see that Afghanistan is the most frequently mentioned country, unsurprising given its importance in international politics after September 11, 2001. In the overall corpus (1987–2023), Afghanistan is followed by Ukraine and Russia, while for instance China appeared so infrequently in German foreign and security policy that it did not even count among the top ten (Fig. 3). This is quite surprising given China’s outsized prominence in U.S. discourse (cf. Nymalm 2020).

Things began to move in the summer of 2014, when Ukrainian troops made significant military progress and captured Sloviansk. In reaction, Russia intervened directly, sending 6,500 troops to Donbas (Allan 2020, p. 7). In a speech in September 2014, Chancellor Merkel acknowledged that the situation was never “a conflict in Ukraine but a conflict between Russia and Ukraine,” that is, an interstate conflict (Merkel 2014c, p. 4418). Still, in line with the sedimented practices of a civilian power, Merkel insisted that there could not be “a military solution” to the conflict, which was why Germany would continue to work toward a “political solution” (Merkel 2014c, p. 4419). That solution seemed to come with the Minsk agreement of February 2015. Contrary to Merkel’s statement about the conflict essentially being an interstate war, however, the agreement does not even mention Russia but instead only refers to “Ukrainian troops” and “armed formations from certain areas of the

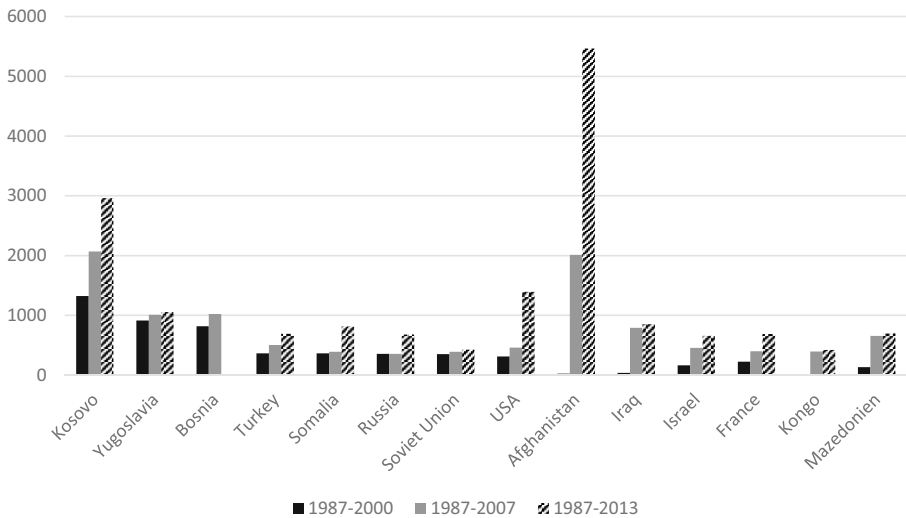


Fig. 2 Mentions of foreign countries in German Bundestag debates, 1987–2013

Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine” as conflict actors, essentially reproducing Russian disinformation about the country’s own role (Allan 2020, p. 11).¹¹

Only with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine did this ambiguous stance change and the dislocated character of Germany’s security discourse with respect to Russia came more to the fore. The sheer number of references to Russia and Ukraine in parliamentary debates, which explodes in 2022 (Fig. 1), does indeed suggest a turning point following the invasion. It is notable that references to Russia increased only after the full-scale invasion, not during Russia’s massive troop buildup at the Ukrainian border in late 2021. In 2021, Russia is mentioned only 237 times overall, less often than in 2019. Similarly, Ukraine is mentioned only 142 times in parliamentary debates in 2021, but the number increases to 2,578 in 2022 (Fig. 1). This lends some tentative support to the claim that German foreign policy elites did not expect that Russia would invade Ukraine (Driedger 2022).

From 2014 right up to the full-scale invasion, MPs argued that there was no alternative to diplomacy and negotiations. This changed radically following Russian recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk in late February 2022 and the invasion shortly thereafter. In the run-up to the Russian invasion, when Russian troops were being deployed at the Ukrainian border, German decision-makers threatened “massive consequences” in the case of a military attack on Ukraine but focused on economic sanctions (Baerbock 2022, p. 880). In January, Chancellor Scholz had called the “crisis in Ukraine,” as he referred to it, a “serious threat to security in Europe” but still argued in favor of dialogue as the primary means to achieve “the necessary progress for security in Europe” (Scholz 2022a, p. 478). In the run-up to the invasion, when Russian troops had been deployed to the Ukrainian

¹¹ The full text of the Minsk Agreement is available here: <https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de>

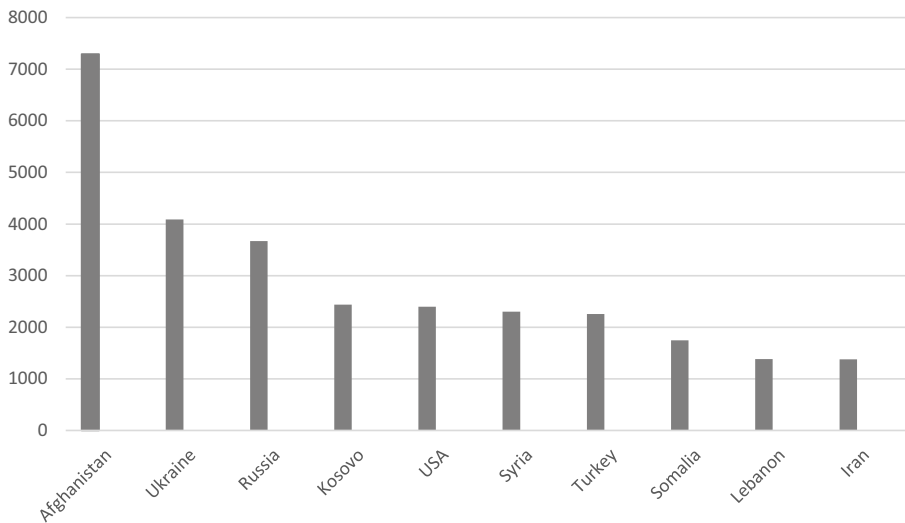


Fig. 3 Overall mentions of foreign countries in German Bundestag debates, 1987–2023

border, German policymakers, in particular those of the SPD, stressed that “sustainable security cannot be had against Russia but only with Russia” (Stegner 2022, p. 1119). This changed in February 2022. In his *Zeitenwende* speech, Chancellor Scholz argued that Russia’s invasion presented a major break in European history. The attack confronted Germany and the West with a clear binary choice, namely to “allow Putin to turn back the clocks to the times of the great powers of the 19th century or [...] summon the strength to impose limits on war mongers like Putin” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1350). The dislocation of sedimented practices is increasingly tied to the construction of antagonistic frontiers. Let us turn to this third element of the nexus between crisis and change in the following.

5.3 Antagonism

Translocation depicts an articulatory structure in which a discursive moment that has traditionally been articulated outside of a particular discourse enters and destabilizes the internal structure of that discourse. It is engendered through relations of antagonism, which depict the permeable limits of a social system such as, for instance, a nation, in which the limit of the system is one of illusory exclusion. It has become evident from what has been presented thus far that antagonism was not very prominent until 2022. For instance, in November 2013 the Bundestag held a debate on the then upcoming Eastern Partnership (EaP) summit. During the debate, Chancellor Merkel addressed Russian President Putin’s opposition to an increased approach between the European Union (EU) and EaP countries. At that point, the German government still emphasized dialogue with Russia, stressing that the EaP was “not directed against Russia” and that Russia itself would also “benefit” from the “strengthening and modernization” of the EaP countries’ economies (Merkel

2013, p. 26; Kauder 2013, p. 33).¹² Indeed, closer ties with the EU and with Russia were not to be seen as mutually exclusive; MP Gernot Erler (SPD) blamed Russia's continuing opposition to the EaP on the Russian leadership's predisposition to view the issue in terms of "geopolitical competition over influence and [as a] zero-sum game" (Erler 2013, p. 30). MP Dietmar Bartsch (Left Party) went further, arguing that the aim of the EaP should not be to "withdraw the East European countries from Russia's influence." To Bartsch, it was only understandable that Russia was watching increased cooperation between the EU and the EaP countries "like a hawk" (*mit Argusaugen*) because the EaP was not about "a partnership on equal terms," human rights, or democracy, but about the creation of markets for European products, to the detriment of the economies of the EU's future partners if necessary: "The much-touted democracy promotion serves as a means for the EU to continue its neoliberal policy of hegemony in the Eastern European countries." The real drivers behind the EaP were "the exertion of influence and power politics" (Bartsch 2013, p. 28).

Similarly, when security forces began to violently crack down on the Euromaidan protests (including kidnapping and killing protesters; Kudelia 2014), MP Niels Annen (SPD) called the events a "tragedy" (Annen 2014, p. 1205). In an ensuing struggle about the proper articulation of these different crises, antagonistic frontiers are difficult to detect, although some voices started to point in the direction of Russia. MP Andreas Schockenhoff (CDU), for instance, pointed out that Russia was not neutral but had actively contributed to the escalation by blackmailing Ukraine, but at the same time he warned that Germany should not let itself get pressured into a "zero-sum logic"; either all of Europe, including Russia, would win "or we all lose due to instability and insecurity in Europe" (Schockenhoff 2014, p. 1207). Even after the unconstitutionally declared independence of Crimea in March 2014 (but before the annexation), Chancellor Merkel explicitly stressed that the conflict could not be "solved militarily" and repeated her previous claim that the EaP was "not directed against Russia" (Merkel 2014b, pp. 1519, 1520).

A picture emerges that illustrates well the complex and nonlinear interplay between the reliance on sedimented practices, ongoing dislocation, and the construction of antagonistic frontiers that tentatively stabilize something like a "foreign policy identity." Although efforts to avoid articulating the conflict as a "war" were prevalent, a recurring form of dislocation becomes visible when, for instance, MP Gunther Krichbaum (CDU/CSU) argued that Putin was trying to "create" a frozen conflict in Ukraine by annexing Crimea. Ultimately, Putin was striving for "dominance" and "hegemony." Krichbaum criticized any attempt to question Ukrainian sovereignty, demanded that Putin "make concessions," and proposed the idea of economic sanctions (Krichbaum 2014, p. 2666).

However, it was only after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that the most significant word cluster appearing in parliamentary debates was "Russia must not win this war,"¹³ appearing in five sessions altogether. Although one could legitimately argue that the "crisis" had begun in 2014 at the latest, if not much earlier,

¹² Compare also Davies's (2023) helpful autopsy of Germany's "misperceptions and wrong assumptions" regarding Russia.

¹³ *Russland darf diesen Krieg nicht gewinnen.*

Table 3 Top ten collocates of “russ*” before and after the Crimea crisis and after the *Zeitenwende*

Rank	Before the annexation of Crimea	After the annexation of Crimea	After the invasion
1	China	Ukraine	Against
2	Russia	USA	Ukraine
3	NATO	China	War of aggression
4	USA	Federation (Russian Federation)	War
5	Ukraine	Crimea	Federation
6	With	With	In (<i>bei</i>)
7	Council	NATO	Troops
8	India	Founding Act (NATO–Russia Founding Act)	Sanctions
9	Partnership	Side (the Russian side)	Oil (oil and gas embargo)
10	And	Russia	Attack

it was not articulated as such until 2022, and Russia was articulated in antagonistic terms only thereafter. In his *Zeitenwende* speech, however, Chancellor Scholz did not just condemn the Russian attack but also clearly rejected the argument that Russian actions were defensive. As Scholz argued, “Russian President Putin has coldheartedly started a war of aggression—for one reason [only]: the freedom of Ukrainians questions his own regime of oppression” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1350). Putin was articulated as a threat to peace and security in Europe (Scholz 2022b, p. 1350). The changed articulation of Russia after the invasion is clearly also visible in quantitative terms. Before the annexation of Crimea, Russia had been primarily associated with partnership. As noted above, following the annexation of Crimea, “partnership” all but vanished from the discourse. Following the invasion in 2022, Russia became primarily associated with war and aggression (Table 3).

The complex entanglement of sedimented practices, dislocation, and antagonism is clearly noticeable here again. Allegedly stable cultural identities, tied to long-held and entrenched practices, are dislocated by new meanings entering the discourse, and political decision-makers find themselves lost in social complexity that is highly contingent. Within a statistically identifiable array of dislocating articulations, a hegemonic struggle occurs that opens the path for alternative meanings and, thus, foreign policy change to become possible.

For instance, the way the antagonistic frontier was drawn is in line with a (simplified) liberal interpretation of the causes of war that explains external aggression as the result of a lack of democratic governance. Thus, Chancellor Scholz and others drew a clear line between Putin and his “kleptocratic clique” on one hand and the Russian people on the other hand (Wadephul 2022, p. 1118). As Scholz argued, the target of Western sanctions was “not the Russian people.” For, according to Scholz, it was “Putin, not the Russian people, [who] has decided for war. [...] This war is Putin’s war” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1351). Scholz continued that “many” in Russia “reject his [Putin’s] war against Ukraine.” And like his predecessors before him, Scholz expressed confidence that in the long run, “[f]reedom, tolerance and human

rights will assert themselves also in Russia,” again reinscribing liberal discursive practices into the discourse (Scholz 2022b, p. 1351). Thus, while Putin as a dictator is clearly articulated as the Other, the Russian people are not. Ukraine, on the other hand, was clearly articulated as part of the West as a value community. As Scholz claimed, Ukrainians were defending “not just their homeland. They fight for freedom and [...] democracy, for values that we share with them” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1351). Reinscribing the antagonistic frontier between Nazi Germany and post-1945 Germany into the discourse (Stengel 2020; Zehfuss 2002), Scholz added that “[a]s democrats, as Europeans we stand side by side with them, on the right side of history” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1351). As we will see, these articulations engendered new forms of institutionalized foreign policy practices.

5.4 Hegemony

For a deeper analysis of the material dimensions of Germany’s security policy, it is important to note that military support for Ukraine has been contested (cf. Heck 2024). Recurring dislocatory practices (ephemeral dislocation) engendered a hegemonic struggle between different forces on how to pursue the right policies toward Russia. In January 2022, for instance, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock announced the delivery of helmets to Ukraine (Baerbock 2022, p. 880). Both the left-wing Left Party and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) opposed the government’s position, with the former rejecting deployments of NATO troops to East European NATO allies such as Lithuania and the AfD comparing Russia’s preinvasion troop buildup to the Monroe Doctrine that considered foreign intervention in the Americas as a threat to the United States.¹⁴ But Scholz’s own SPD also opposed weapons deliveries right up to the invasion. For instance, one month before the attack, Lars Klingbeil outlined the SPD’s position:

“And I say explicitly at this point: delivering weapons does not mean to strengthen peace efforts.

(Applause among SPD MPs)

That is why [I] very clearly [say]: We will not deliver weapons to Ukraine.

(Applause among the SPD and the Greens as well as among MPs of the FDP and the Linke)” (Klingbeil 2022, p. 884).

While we have argued so far that the adherence to sedimented practices and recurring dislocatory practices go hand in hand, we also notice that the representation of the situation in the German Bundestag shifted significantly in 2022 (Scholz 2022b, p. 1351). In his *Zeitenwende* speech, Scholz spoke of an “assault on Ukraine” (*Überfall*, also the German word for robbery) and a “war of aggression.” The “new reality” created by Russia’s invasion, Scholz continued, “demands a clear response” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1350). Translocation, the internal disruption and external infiltration and contamination of sedimented practices, is generated through relations of antagonism in this ensuing discourse. Hegemony becomes visible in the statistically graspable accumulation of particular articulations, with “war” replacing the

¹⁴ Debate on the motion by *Die Linke*, Deutscher Bundestag, *Plenarprotokoll*, 20/17, 17 February 2022.

reference to “annexation,” and the articulation of antagonism triumphing over the previously dominant notion of “partnership.”

Against the background of highly conspicuous instances of translocation as well as disarticulation, the federal government subsequently decided to supply arms to Ukraine to support the “defense of the country.” In light of “Putin’s aggression,” Germany would do “whatever is needed to secure the peace in Europe” (Scholz 2022b, pp. 1351, 1352). Similar to justifications of previous military interventions such as Operation Allied Force in 1999 (Stengel 2020), Scholz argued that the government was left with no alternative: “Putin’s aggression,” Scholz continued, left the government with “no other response” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1351). This discursive articulation of the situation as one in which the federal government itself is put in a situation in which it has no choice—what Watson and Hay have referred to in a different context as the “logic of no alternative” (Watson and Hay 2003)—arguably makes the provision of arms to Ukraine more acceptable against the background of sedimented antimilitarist practices and the rule not to export arms into conflict regions. Moreover, in what has been heralded (potentially prematurely) as a “revolution in German military affairs,” (Major and Mölling 2022) and what Scholz (2023, p. 28) himself has described as “the starkest change in German security policy since the establishment of the Bundeswehr in 1955,” he announced that his government would “invest significantly more in the security of our country” to protect “our freedom and our democracy” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1352). In the same vein, the 2023 Defense Policy Guidelines, issued in November, call for Germany to become “the backbone of deterrence and collective defence in Europe” (Federal Ministry of Defence 2023, p. 6). In a more recent op-ed in *The Economist*, Scholz stated that the government’s goal was “to turn the Bundeswehr into Europe’s strongest conventional force” (Scholz 2024). Aside from Putin’s attack, this aspiration has to be contextualized within a larger European discourse of “Westlessness” centered on a potential U.S. abandonment that emerged during the presidency of Donald J. Trump and is likely to become even more influential after his 2024 re-election (Ruppert 2024).

The articulation of the invasion as an unprecedented crisis makes processes of disarticulation most visible. Previously articulated meanings collapse and become nonarticulable, particular practices become meaningless, open spaces appear in the ensuing discourse, potentially traumatic in that they remain disconnected from any sedimented practice. Disarticulation thus points to the void that discourses produce, the temporary and contingent impossibility of signification, and sometimes the collapse of meaning. It is precisely this meaning of crisis that is implicit in the notion of dislocation, which makes hegemonic politics possible in the first place. With the connection between the dislocation of sedimented practices, antagonism and hegemonic politics becoming increasingly apparent, Chancellor Scholz could now unambiguously lay the blame at Putin’s feet, whom he described as “unscrupulous,” “cold-blooded,” and a “warmonger” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1350). The conflict is portrayed as one between “Putin and the free world.” Moreover, rejecting arguments about supposedly legitimate security interests, Scholz argued that the war had “a single reason,” namely that Ukraine’s freedom called Putin’s autocratic regime into question (Scholz 2022b, p. 1350). Moreover, Scholz argued, there was “no doubt” that Putin’s goal was to “create a Russian empire” (Scholz 2022b, p. 1352).

In the 2 years after Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, Germany has gradually committed itself to delivering ever more equipment to Ukraine, including infantry fighting vehicles, Leopard and Leopard 2 main battle tanks, Panzerhaubitze 2000 self-propelled howitzers, Gepard self-propelled antiaircraft guns, IRIS-T and Patriot air defense systems, and MARS II multiple rocket launchers.¹⁵ Although this was not the first German delivery of weapons to an active combat zone (Germany had delivered weapons to the Peschmerga in Iraq to fight against the Islamic State), the large-scale delivery of weapons, including main battle tanks, is indeed a substantive development regarding Germany's stance on arms exports. The *Zeitenwende* case thus shows that for novel foreign policy practices to gain ground, a comprehensive analysis of the notions of sedimented practices, dislocation, antagonism, and hegemony is indispensable and may in future research replace agent-based understandings of crisis and change.

6 Conclusion

This article analyzed the nexus between the articulation of crisis and foreign policy change. German security policy served as an illustration for the main argument that this nexus can only be understood through an investigation of four interrelated and mutually engendering concepts: sedimented practices, dislocation in the form of recurring translocation and disarticulation, antagonism, and the materialization of a tentatively stable but always contingent hegemonic discourse. Change, it may be concluded, happens neither temporarily isolated nor as locally identifiable. Rather, it is dispersed and holistic, as any allegedly isolated crisis is connected with every other. The dislocation of sedimented practices is ongoing, sometimes surprising, but never-ending. Change, not stability, is the standard of any articulation of foreign policy. In that sense, dislocation becomes the ontological prerequisite of any form of ontic instantiation, in that foreign policy practices are never complete, and a nation's ephemeral identity becomes graspable through the manifold and sometimes contradictory practices that put it into place.

The lexicometric analysis conducted here illustrates these arguments quite aptly. After the invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia remained of minor importance in the German security discourse. Judging from the mentions of Ukraine over time (Fig. 1), even the 2014 annexation of Crimea does not appear to have had a lasting impact on German parliamentary debates. In fact, after a brief increase in mentions, discursive articulations flatten out again quite quickly after 2014. Unsurprisingly against the background of previously established discourses, including (what was considered as objective) knowledge about Russia and Ukraine, the Crimea crisis was articulated not as a war but as a kind of intrastate conflict. Dislocatory practices appeared in various other forms, for instance by so-called new threats. What we observe here is a nonlinear interplay between rather stable sedimented practices, ongoing dislocation, and the construction of antagonistic frontiers. It comes as no surprise that military support for Ukraine has been contested continuously. What

¹⁵ <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/military-support-ukraine-2054992>

does not normally happen is a radical discursive change in a particular policy area. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, this has not happened. Rather, crisis must be understood in terms of dislocating practices consisting of many elements of translocation and disarticulation that only sediment over time. In German foreign policy, too, the turning point is therefore not a revolution but, rather, a small-scale process.

It may be concluded that while identity is never stable, it is only graspable through the analysis of an ongoing dislocation of sedimented practices, which might previously have been reasonable but are increasingly called into question by the “pulling and hauling” that is politics (Allison and Halperin 1972, p. 43). The finding that the years 2008 (the Russian war with Georgia) and 2014 (the Russian annexation of Crimea) did not change German foreign policy in a comprehensive and linear sense, but were instead characterized by repetitive dislocating articulations, shows the complex interplay of sedimented practices and foreign policy change. It also shows how dislocation and antagonism are mutually reinforcing and that the articulation of threat becomes a precondition for new institutionalized practices after the German chancellor’s *Zeitenwende* speech to ensue. Finally, it demonstrates the political nature of any crisis articulations, which are highly contingent and non-deterministic. It is this conclusion that future research on crisis and change will have to consider.

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