The foreign policy transition of the German Scholz government in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and its causes

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Abstract. Following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, German Chancellor Scholz delivered the Zeitenwende speech on February 27, 2022, announcing a series of measures including the supply of weapons to Ukraine and the strengthening of its own defense forces. This was a historic transition for Germany's foreign and security policy, which has always been pacifist. This paper will take the transformation of the German Scholz government's foreign policy in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as the object of study. And it is the purpose of this paper to analyze the reasons why this historical transition in foreign policy occurred in Germany at this time. In general, this paper specifically analyzes the Scholz government's foreign policy transition based on the analytical model of foreign policy transition proposed by Jakob Gustavsson, and argues that international factors, domestic factors, policy makers' factors, and the stimulus of the crisis are the four main factors that led to this foreign policy transition.

Keywords: Germany, Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Foreign policy change.

1. Introduction

Since World War II, pacifism has been the main feature of German foreign policy [1]. Germany opposed reliance on military power in the conduct of its foreign policy and insisted on restraining the development of its own military power. German foreign policy has shown great continuity in this feature. On December 8, 2021, Germany's Parliament elected Olaf Scholz as the ninth Chancellor after World War II, replacing Angela Merkel, who had led Germany for 16 years. Even though there is a growing debate in Germany about whether Germany should change its foreign policy and take more responsibility for security internationally, Scholz came to power saying he would maintain the continuity of German foreign policy and preserve the political legacy left by Merkel's 16 years [2]. Until February 24, 2022, when the Russian-Ukrainian conflict broke out, Scholz delivered the Zeitenwende speech on February 27, 2022, stating that Germany had ushered in a historic watershed and announcing that Germany would respond to the security challenges posed by Russia by providing arms to Ukraine, unconditionally fulfilling its collective defense obligations within NATO, and strengthening its own defense forces [3]. This decision is an attempt to make a change in Germany's foreign policy tradition of not relying on the military, and has been described as a revolution in German foreign policy. The future of German foreign policy may thus be transformed and will continue to evolve in this direction. Thus, it can be said that the Zeitenwende speech represents a historic shift in German foreign policy.

The transformation of foreign policy has always been a key area of concern in foreign policy studies, and the relevant theories have been developed to a high degree of maturity and sophistication. The Zeitenwende speech represents the Scholz government's foreign policy transformation, which is a relatively new case study of foreign policy transformation. It is worth noting that this is not only a reorientation of the Scholz government's own foreign policy, but also a deeper transformation of Germany's foreign policy tradition since World War II, and therefore has greater research value. The Scholz government's foreign policy transition has already attracted attention, but it is still dominated by press reports and policy commentaries. Some scholars have also conducted studies on this issue. However, most of the studies have focused on the characteristics and processes of the German foreign policy transition or only studied one aspect of it in depth, while the literature that systematically studies the motives of this transition is relatively small and the combination with theory is insufficient. This paper attempts to analyze the Scholz government's foreign policy transition using the analytical

model of foreign policy transition proposed by Jakob Gustavsson, and systematically discusses the motives of the Scholz government's foreign policy transition, hoping to provide case support for the theories of foreign policy transition and further enrich and improve them.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Analytical model of foreign policy transition

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) attempts to explain the decisions of human decision makers with reference to or with known consequences for entities other than their nation states [4]. Foreign policy transition is a key area of research within FPA and has a rich body of theoretical research. Foreign policy transition is generally defined as a comprehensive and significant change in a country's foreign policy over a relatively short period of time, reflected in a change in the behavior and manner in which a country interacts with other actors within the international system [5]. In terms of the dynamics of foreign policy change, scholars represented by Charles F. Herman and Jakob Gustavsson have proposed more sophisticated analytical models. In Herman's model, he proposes that the root causes of foreign policy changes can be analyzed from four perspectives: Leader driven, Bureaucratic advocacy, Domestic restructuring, and External shocks [6]. Jakob Gustavsson absorbed Herman's research results and presents his own view that changes in fundamental structural conditions, strategic political leadership, and the presence of a crisis of some kind are the three core elements of foreign policy change [7]. Specifically, Gustavsson argues that fundamental structural conditions include international and domestic political economy factors, strategic political leadership focuses on the perception of foreign policy by policy makers, and the presence of a crisis determines when such changes occur. In short, changes in international and domestic factors trigger changes in policy makers' perceptions, and then policy makers achieve changes in foreign policy through certain decision-making processes [8].

2.2. The analytical framework

As can be seen from the above, Gustavsson's model is based on the modified Herman's model, but compared with Herman's model, he proposes that domestic and international factors can be analyzed from both political and economic aspects respectively, and emphasizes the impact of deeper changes in international structure in addition to sudden crises, and believes that cognitive factors should be at the individual level rather than at the collective level. Gustavsson's model balances systemic and individual, macro and micro, objective and subjective, and is therefore chosen as the theoretical support for this study.

To sum up, this paper will briefly review the characteristics of the Scholz government's foreign policy transition, and then analyze the causes of the Scholz government's foreign policy transition in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war from four perspectives: international factors, domestic factors, policy makers' factors, and the stimulus of the crisis, in the hope of obtaining a more systematic and in-depth research result.

3. The Zeitenwende speech and the process of German foreign policy transformation

During Scholz's election campaign, Scholz promised to maintain continuity with Merkel's government in foreign policy, and after taking office he did, as he said, make no major changes to Merkel's foreign policy. In the early days of his term, inheriting the characteristics of Merkel's foreign policy, Scholz still advocated a peaceful diplomatic solution to the conflict in Ukraine. Germany still supports the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project despite international criticism, and emphasizes dialogue and diplomatic solutions. On the issue of arms deliveries to Ukraine, Germany has repeatedly rejected Ukraine's requests for weapons, arguing that the delivery of weapons would only accelerate the deterioration of the situation and would not be conducive to the resolution of the

conflict. As a result, the U.S.-led NATO allies called Germany "the weakest link in NATO" [9]. These initiatives reflected Scholz's adherence to the German pacifist tradition early in his tenure.

On February 22, 2022, the German government finally announced the suspension of the Nord Stream 2 project to address the rapidly deteriorating crisis in Ukraine and international pressure on Germany to change its foreign policy [10], signaling the beginning of an attempt to transform German policy. It was not until February 24, when the Russian-Ukrainian conflict broke out in full force, that a real watershed in German foreign policy was reached. On February 27, Scholz delivered the Zeitenwende speech, a complete exposition of Germany's new foreign defense policy, marking a historic transition in German foreign policy. In the Zeitenwende speech, Scholz pointed out that Germany is experiencing a watershed in its history and proposed five courses of action to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. First, support Ukraine, including the supply of weapons to Ukraine. Second, impose sanctions on Russia. Third, unconditionally fulfill its collective defense obligations within NATO. Fourth, establish a strong German Bundeswehr, create a special fund for the Bundeswehr, and increase defense spending to 2% of GDP. Fifth, take measures to ensure the country's energy security [11]. These five courses of action, especially the fourth one, implies that Germany is attempting to change the tradition of pacifist foreign policy that it has maintained since World War II. Since 1990, German defense spending has never reached 2% of GDP and has remained at about 1.3% for the past 20 years [12]. Thus, this Scholz's foreign policy decision is historic for the change of Germany's non-military-dependent foreign policy.

4. Reasons for the transformation of German foreign policy

4.1. International factors

Against the backdrop of intensifying East-West confrontation, the international understanding Germany has gained on historical issues and the demands of NATO and the EU for Germany to take more responsibility for defense and security are international factors for German foreign policy transition.

First of all, today's world is characterized by continuing tensions and increased confrontation between East and West. Along with the rise of Eastern power represented by China and the West's suppression of the East on all geopolitical and economic fronts, confrontation between East and West has intensified in both quantity and tension. This confrontation has taken on a bloc-like character. Western forces, led by the U.S. and the EU, and Eastern forces, led by Russia and China, are becoming increasingly united within themselves and are engaging in diverse economic, political, and military confrontations with the other camp. Economically, a trade war has broken out between the U.S. and China, and the East and West have imposed sanctions on each other covering various industries. Politically, the policies of each side, as exemplified by the U.S. and EU Indo-Pacific strategies, are evidence of the intense geopolitical game being played between East and West. Militarily, the process of NATO's eastward expansion continues, and the U.S., EU, Russia, and China are all building up their military forces, including nuclear weapons. The increasingly tense situation in Ukraine is also a typical manifestation of the East-West confrontation. The progressively tense world situation makes Germany face more serious security threats and has the need to develop stronger security and defense forces.

Besides, Germany has gained the understanding of the international community on historical issues. The historical experience of World War I and II originally made the international community more wary of Germany's military power, and the development of Germany's defense forces was limited. Germany has always adhered to a pacifist foreign policy, as reflected in its restraint in the Iraq war, the Libyan conflict, and the long-standing situation in Ukraine [13]. And Germany has always shown a very sincere attitude of apology and reflection about the war. This has caused the international community to gradually drop its guard against Germany's military power, and European countries have even begun to trust Germany's power.

On the basis of the above two reasons, NATO and the EU have become more demanding for Germany to assume more security and defense responsibilities. On the one hand, the United States and NATO have repeatedly stressed their desire for Germany to assume more responsibility for security. NATO allies have strongly criticized Berlin in the past for not meeting the target of 2% of GDP for military spending [14]. And as early as the Trump administration, Germany was repeatedly condemned by the United States for this [15], which even had an impact on German-US relations. On the other hand, the decline in relative power and strategic contraction of the U.S. has enhanced the need for Europe to develop its own defense forces. after 2016, the relative power position of the U.S. has diminished, and the U.S. no longer considers the maintenance of the rules-based order and its institutions a priority, either in terms of willingness or capacity [16]. Along with the increasing security threats facing the EU, the EU has become more aware of the importance of achieving strategic autonomy and developing its own defense forces. Germany's leadership position in the EU, but its failure to contribute as much as France to EU defense, has led European countries to expect Germany to play a greater role in European strategic autonomy.

4.2. Domestic factors

Against the background of the long-term mismatch between German military power and defense policy and national strength and status, the declining influence of historical memory within Germany, and the support of German public opinion for Germany's policy transition in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are the domestic factors of German foreign policy transition.

First, Germany's military power and defense policy have shown a long-term mismatch with the country's power and status. 2021, Germany's GDP is about $4.22 trillion, ranking fourth in the world and first in the EU [17]. In the 2021 Military Strength Ranking, Germany ranks fifteenth in the world and fourth in the EU, behind France, the United Kingdom, and Italy [18]. This shows that Germany's military power does not match the country's strength. And Germany's long-standing restrained defense policy is an important reason for this situation. Some scholars point out that the gap between Germany's potential and performance in the field of security and defense policy is the largest in the overall German foreign strategy [19]. Germany leadership role in the EU, but its significant shortcomings in military power actually limit Germany's ability to exert greater influence in the EU and international politics. If Germany wants to play a more important role in international politics, it is necessary to strengthen its military power.

Second, the influence of historical memory within Germany has declined. The painful historical memory of the World War II was the basis for the formation of Germany's pacifist concept and has a strong constraining effect on the formulation of Germany's foreign and defense policies. But the influence of historical memory has declined in recent years. The key reason for this is the generational change in German politics and voters. Among parliamentarians, the number of young members of the Bundestag reached an all-time high after the 2021 general election. And among voters, the post-80s, post-90s and even post-00s are gradually beginning to exert an increasingly strong political influence [20]. The younger generation is less constrained by historical memory and does not see Germany as inferior to other Western countries in terms of identity and values; on the contrary, their demands are more diverse and they want Germany to take more responsibility internationally [21], which makes historical memory less influential in German politics.

Third, German public opinion supports Germany's foreign policy transition in the midst of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has caused German public opinion to shift and begin to realize the importance of Germany providing arms to Ukraine and developing its own military power. According to the survey, there was a dramatic change in the public's attitude toward the arms delivery issue: from February to early March, the percentage of voters surveyed in favor of it increased rapidly from 20% to 61%, with 45% of them believing that Berlin's transition was too late. And as for the transformation of German foreign policy, 53% of those polled thought it was appropriate, while 27% thought it was not enough and 14% thought the change was too much [22]. This shows that German public opinion is generally supportive of German foreign

policy transition in the midst of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The German government will consider catering to this public opinion when making decisions.

4.3. Policy makers' factors

The decision-making factor of Germany's foreign policy transition is mainly reflected in two aspects, namely Scholz's personal and other decision makers.

On Scholz's personal side, Scholz always had the idea of increasing the defense force. A report in the German weekly Der Spiegel showed that the Defense Ministry had drafted a series of classified documents on rearmament plans in October 2021. And at this juncture, when the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has erupted, Scholz has come up with this old template [23]. Arguably, this opportunity provided Scholz with the rationale to realize his ideas. Scholz made the Zeitenwende speech without consulting the key members of the ruling coalition, and this important decision could be said to have been made by Scholz alone [24]. It is clear that Scholz played an important personal role in the transformation of German foreign policy.

In terms of other decision makers involved, since the 2014 Munich Security Conference, German experts committed to foreign affairs, security, and defense have been strong advocates of change beyond any particular party affiliation [25]. Initiatives for foreign policy transformation by other executive officials within the government have also driven German foreign policy transformation. For example, when German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Kiev and Moscow in January 2022, she took a tough stance on Russia, frankly warning against Russia [26]. And after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, she expressed support on the issue of whether heavy weapons should be sent to Ukraine, which has torn German politicians. This will all have some impact on Germany's foreign and defense policy.

4.4. Stimulus of the crisis

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict stimulated the German foreign policy transition and was the immediate trigger for this historic transformation, which determined the occasion for the German foreign policy transition.

On February 24, 2022, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict officially broke out, bringing a big shock to Germany and Europe. Germany has always relied on multilateralism, social soft power, and economic power in its diplomacy, but these have not been able to contain Putin's actions [27], and the irreplaceable role of hard power was fully revealed in this conflict. This has made Germany deeply aware of the need to reconsider whether its long-standing pacifist foreign policy is still relevant to the present. Germany's pacifist foreign policy needs to be underpinned by a peaceful, secure and stable international environment, and the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict reminds Germany that war is not far away and that it should be mindful of the increasingly volatile situation in the world today and the possible security threats facing Europe. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has sent a strong warning to Germany and triggered a change in the thinking and perception of many people in Germany from top to bottom, which directly led to the transformation of German foreign and defense policy.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion

This paper attempts to systematically analyze the causes of Germany's foreign policy transition through this study, to supplement existing research, to provide case support for the development of the theory of foreign policy transition, and to provide directional references for more research in the future academic community. It is worth noting that after Germany decided to transform its foreign policy, the process of putting the transformation plan into practice still suffers from many obstacles, such as Germany's close economic relations with Russia and its energy dependence on Russia may affect the implementation of Germany's policy toward Russia, and the internal party politics and

institutional problems in Germany may also hinder the implementation of the policy transformation. on December 5, 2022, a German government spokesman said Germany may not achieve its goal of spending 2% of GDP on defense this year, and it is yet to be seen whether it will be able to do so next year [28]. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether Germany's foreign policy transition will take hold and what obstacles it will encounter in its implementation.

5.2. Conclusion

This paper adopts the analytical model of foreign policy transition proposed by Jakob Gustavsson to analyze the Scholz government's foreign policy transition, reviewing the process of German foreign policy transition in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict firstly, and then focusing on the reasons why Germany underwent this transition.

The paper argues that there are four main factors that led to this historical transformation of German foreign policy, namely international factors, domestic factors, policy makers' factors, and the stimulus of the crisis. Specifically, at the international level, Germany has gained international understanding on historical issues and has been asked by NATO and the European Union to take more responsibility for security and defense in the context of increased East-West confrontation. At the domestic level, Germany's military strength and defense policy have long been mismatched with the country's strength, the internal influence of historical memory has declined, and German public opinion is generally supportive of Germany's policy transition in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. At the policymaker level, the will of Chancellor Scholz personally, as well as that of other policymaking participants, played a driving role in Germany's foreign policy transition. And the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a sudden crisis was the immediate trigger for the German foreign policy transition, which ultimately determined the transition to take place at this point in time. The foreign policy transition of the German Scholz government deserves more sustained attention and in-depth study by scholars.

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