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The Russia-Ukraine War: Why the Conflict Was Not Prevented

# Did Germany Contribute to Deterrence Failure against Russia in Early 2022?

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## Abstract

*With signs of Russia's aggressive intentions mounting since Fall 2021, Ukraine and NATO allies criticised Germany for not sufficiently contributing to Western efforts at deterring a Russian invasion. The article evaluates this claim by applying deterrence theory and using congruence analysis on foundational policy documents, expert literature and interviews of Russian and Western policymakers. It establishes that states contribute to collective extended deterrence the more they have the capabilities to harm assets that are highly valued by the revisionist and the more the revisionist has reasons to believe that these capabilities would be used if it enacted aggression. The article then evaluates Germany's potential deterrence contributions, establishing that Germany's vast arms industry and economic clout allowed it to significantly threaten the Russian regime through economic destabilisation and prospects of high-casualty fighting. It then gauges Germany's actual deterrence contributions, finding them to have been significantly smaller: Germany deliberately avoided military threats and deliveries of arms to Ukraine. And while Germany did early on threaten to use its significant economic clout against Russia, it remained vague and non-committal over core issues of Russian economic interests, such as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline system. The results provide and inform further hypotheses on the causes of German behaviour and*

*indirect influences on deterrence against Russia. They also urge reconsiderations of strategic thinking in Berlin and elsewhere.*

**Keywords:** *civilian power, Germany, Russo-Ukrainian War, Nord Stream 2, deterrence, sanctions*

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## **Introduction**

By its Central and Eastern European allies, Germany was long considered the most important and least reliable European state when it came to Russia (Stewart 2013; Spanger 2020; Szabo 2015). This dual perception became especially salient in late 2021 to early 2022. With more and more signs of Russia's aggressive intentions mounting, Berlin came under harsh criticism for not sufficiently contributing to Western efforts at deterring a Russian attack on Ukraine. For example, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, diplomatic in his choice of words but unambiguous in the message, stated that Berlin's policy did not 'correspond to the level of our relations and the current security situation'. Kyiv's Mayor and Boxing Legend Vitali Klitschko, well-known and liked in Germany where he had lived for years, posted on Facebook 'On whose side is the German government today? On the side of freedom, which means — Ukraine? Or on the side of the aggressor?'. US President Joe Biden suggested there were divisions within NATO over Ukraine (NBC News 2022a). Three informal talks between informed policymakers in Washington, D.C., where the author was present, suggested the United States might sanction German companies doing business with Russia if Germany did not change course. Senior representatives of the transatlantic expert community also critiqued Germany's Russia policy (Carnegie Europe 2022).

While Germany drastically changed course once the Russian invasion was underway in mid- to late-February (Driedger 2022), the question arises to what extent Germany's earlier behaviour, specifically since the start of Russian preparations for what could well end up being an invasion in late-2021, contributed to a failure of deterring the Russian decision for invading Ukraine to begin with.

This article answers this question through four contributions to our understanding of German foreign policy, international security cooperation, deterrence dynamics, Russo-Western relations and European security. First, drawing on the literature on deterrence theory, I derive criteria to assess how individual states can directly contribute to collective extended deterrence: Such a contribution is greater the more the contributor has capabilities with which it can

harm valued assets of the potential aggressor and the more the potential aggressor believes that these capabilities would be used against it if it enacted aggression. As specific capabilities are a prerequisite to harming valued assets, such capabilities limit the extent of *potential* deterrence contributions. As credible threats are a prerequisite to having these capabilities affect the potential aggressor's behaviour, credibility determines *actual* deterrence contributions. This allows analysts to identify gaps in potential and actual deterrence contributions and adjudicate if a state contributed to deterrence failure.

Second, I evaluate Germany's potential deterrence contributions by mapping capabilities with which Germany could have feasibly threatened assets valued by the Russian regime. Overall, the evidence suggests, that, due to the Putin regime's consistent effort to ensure its own survival, it seeks to prevent widespread societal discontent due to macroeconomic instability and news on large-scale Russian war casualties. Because of Germany's wealth, top-tier arms industry and economic interconnections with Russia, it arguably had the ability to significantly harm Russia's macroeconomic stability and raise the prospects of a drawn-out and mutually bloody conflict by providing Ukraine with arms and training before Russia attacked.

Third, I gauge Germany's actual deterrence contributions by examining to what extent the use of these capabilities was credibly threatened to affect deterrence. On balance, the evidence suggests that Germany provided some contributions to deterring Russian aggression, but that it contributed significantly less than it could have in the light of its capabilities and the efforts of other states like the United Kingdom and the United States: Germany had only very limited overt stakes in Ukraine, rendering Germany's credibility largely contingent on specific signals and policies toward Russia. However, German policymakers actually ruled out the use of military means, including the supply of arms to Ukraine to worsen Russian prospects of a quick and easy victory. Thus, the formidable deterrent potential of Germany's military assets went largely unrealised. Early on, German policymakers did credibly threaten severe economic sanctions in case of a Russian invasion. However, these threats suggested that punishment would exclude key areas of Russian interest such as the pipeline project Nord Stream 2 as well as Russian access to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT). Germany eventually halted Nord Stream 2, but it had not previously threatened to do so in a clear-cut and explicit way. Furthermore, the halt came just days before Russia invaded unoccupied Ukrainian territory, diminishing the deterrent effect of the measure.

Fourth, I extrapolate from my findings various policy implications and pointers for further research. German policy displayed less resolve for proactive deterrence than that of certain other states. Future research should probe into likely

causes, such as the largely civilian security culture in Germany, specifically in the broader population, the speed and military nature of the increasing war threat and dynamics within the newly formed three-party ruling coalition. My findings indicate that German policy might have had indirect effects on collective deterrence, too, due to demonstration effects on allies and the Russian elite as well as due to the complex ways in which the Nord Stream pipelines affect deterrence dynamics between Ukraine, Russia and Western Europe.

This article applies established theory to assesses a historically and politically significant case of deterrence contributions. As data on Russian elite perceptions are scarce, rarely reliable and often indirect, not all parts of the relevant causal mechanisms can be tested, rendering detailed process-tracing an ineffective tool of analysis (Beach & Pedersen 2016: 302–336). Hence, I employ theory-guided explaining-outcome congruence analysis to evaluate deterrence contributions by zeroing in on available evidence on candidate causes and mechanisms (Beach & Pedersen 2016: 271–272). Data stem from foundational policy documents, a survey of expert literature on German and Russian foreign policy and interviews with people involved in relevant policy processes.

The next section develops the framework for conceptualising and measuring direct contributions to collective extended deterrence. The next two sections apply the framework on Germany, respectively analysing potential and actual deterrence contributions. In the last section, I lay out some implications of my findings for future policy and research.

### **Assessing deterrence**

Deterrence is the use of a threat by one party attempting to convince another party not to upset a given status quo. Extended deterrence aims to deter actions against third parties (Quackenbush 2010: 60–61). General deterrence relates to decision-making in conflictual relationships over longer periods of time, say between the United States and the Soviet Union over Western Europe during the Cold War. This article focuses on immediate deterrence, which relates to decision-making within crises, where the danger of attack is imminent (Morgan 1983: 30). Successful deterrence prevails when a potential aggressor has revisionist goals but chooses not to use military force in their pursuit because it fears that the deterrer(s) would retaliate.

Most analytical frameworks on deterrence, just like this one, assume that actors are rational in a thin, instrumental sense: given available information, they will seek to most efficiently employ their resources to realise their preferences (Zagare 1990).

Deterrence can only affect potential aggressors when two scope conditions apply. First, the potential aggressor needs to have revisionist goals towards the

target. Absent revisionist goals, the costly and risky instrument of military escalation (Fearon 1995) need not even be contemplated. Second, revisionism toward the target needs to be limited relative to other assets of the potential aggressor. If revisionist goals were valued over all other assets, no threat to them would deter a potential aggressor (Mazarr et al. 2018: 17–21).

Two factors jointly determine whether an actor's deterrent threats contribute to deterrence. First, the potential aggressor needs to perceive the actor as being sufficiently able to significantly harm the revisionist's valued assets. Second, there need to be credible threats that, in the case of the potential aggressor actually attacking, these capabilities would be used against these valued assets (Schelling 1960). This is an interactive relationship: Threats of using considerable capabilities will not affect the revisionist's behaviour if the revisionist does not believe they would actually be carried out; conversely, revisionists will ignore even believable threats if they calculate that the other side's actions would not significantly harm assets that they value highly.

The general validity of this model has been backed up by many empirical studies. For example, formal military alliances, whose security assurances are contingent on members being attacked, measurably reduce conflict likelihood between alliance members and other states (Johnson, Leeds & Wu 2015). Higher aggregate ally capabilities in extended deterrence have been found to correlate with less aggression against the target (Bak 2018).

Perceived credibility stems from two main sources (Danilovic 2001). The first source, regional stakes, denotes cases in which the challenger presumes strong credibility of the deterrer because the deterrer has a lot of overt and materially visible interests in maintaining the status quo (Danilovic 2001). Arguably, a good example of insufficient regional stakes leading to deterrence failure is the Falklands War, where the Argentinian Junta had reasons to believe the United Kingdom would not fight over a distant and small dependency.

The second main source of credibility is costly signals, sometimes conceptualised as 'risk escalation strategies' (Danilovic 2001: 349). Deterrers, especially when extending protection to others, often have strong incentives to overstate their commitment – a fact not lost on potential aggressors. A prominent example of deterrence failure due to a lack of costly signals is Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, as Germany deemed an ally intervention unlikely due to repeated backtracking by France and the United Kingdom in past crises. To signal *actual* commitment and distinguish it from 'cheap talk', deterrers can send costly signals to the challenger by deliberately putting their resources, security and reputations on the line (Danilovic 2001). In doing so, deterrers accept future costs if they do not deliver on their deterrent threats in the future, signalling their resolve over the issue (Schelling 1960).

For democracies, a crucial source for credibility are specific and public commitments by leaders (Fearon 1994). If leaders publicly issue deterrent threats, but fail to deliver in the case of aggression, they incur the risk of their electorate perceiving this as dishonesty or incompetence, thus increasing the risk of being removed from office through democratic mechanisms. This mechanism is usually referred to as ‘tying hands’ in the literature (Fearon 1997). The intimate connection between such ‘audience costs’ and leader-specific public threats, especially in more democratic and liberal polities, is well-attested for (e.g. Lupton 2020; McManus 2018).

While relevant data on highly sensitive policy issues are by their very nature partially unavailable to researchers, there are enough suitable sources to assess all relevant concepts with some reliability and validity. Capabilities (such as Germany’s troops, arms manufacturing infrastructure and economic links with Russia) as well as regional stakes (such as Ukraine’s actual and potential role for the German economy) are largely material and therefore assessable through open sources and expert assessments.

The degree and nature of the Russian elite’s revisionist intentions and vulnerabilities can be gauged through the implied costs of rhetoric and actions. Given an evidently pertinent goal and various policy options with varying degrees of likely efficacy and risks to key assets, the choosing of policy options that seem to entail less efficacy but also fewer risks to key assets indicate that the goal is only of limited importance relative to the key asset. For example, if, during the war, Russian elites had decided for general mobilisation, Russia’s battle efficacy would have risen, but the risk of public discontent would have risen as well. I draw data from polls, foundational Russian documents, expert assessments of Russian policy and Russian elite statements.

Costly signals are largely assessed through the entailed costs of policies and rhetoric by the German political elite. Relevant and used evidence includes expert assessments, newspaper articles, databases and interviews with people knowledgeable on relevant policy processes. As deterrent signals entail higher credibility when they are specific and committed to in public (see above), the analytical focus will be on them.

In sum, a potential aggressor can be deterred when its revisionist goals are limited, when others can harm the potential aggressor’s valued assets and when they can credibly threaten that this would be done if aggression were to happen. The next section applies the framework to identify assets that the Russian regime seemingly values so much that, in order to safeguard them, it is willing to jeopardise other policy goals, including over Ukraine. The section also maps the capabilities with which German political elites could have threatened these assets.

### **Potential deterrence contributions**

A key interest of Russian policy has long been to ensure the political survival of Putin, his inner circle and the regime that grants them their elevated position (Frye 2021). This has been established by several thorough studies into the Russian informal system of authority and power (Monaghan 2012), the workings of its dominant party United Russia (Reuter 2017), the Kremlin's macroeconomic policies (Miller 2018) and the development of Russia's force structure and military doctrine (Renz 2019).

This consistent prioritisation of regime survival relates to two core interests that Germany arguably has had the capability to harm in response to a Russian invasion of Ukraine. First, the Russian regime has consistently sought to maintain macroeconomic stability to protect the regime's social contract with the population and ensure cohesion and loyalty in its own ranks. This has been established by research on Russian macroeconomic policies and the political economy of Russia (Dawisha 2014; Miller 2018). These considerations still rank high on the Kremlin's priority list. Putin put at the forefront of the 2021 state of the nation speech the themes of healthcare, social policy and economics, stating that '[e]nsuring macroeconomic stability and containing inflation within set parameters is an extremely important task' (Putin 2021). As of June 2022, despite the major economic fallout due to factors relating to the war, the Russian regime has not significantly slashed any welfare measures.

A second consistent element of Russian policy has been to avoid the adverse effects of drawn-out long-term warfare. This is arguably to prevent public dismay and diminishing regime support following news on Russian casualties. Past Russian military operations evince this Russian interest: When waging post-Soviet Russia's first interstate war against Georgia in 2008, Russian leaders ensured that Russia was well-prepared and could bring overwhelming force to bear, defeating the small Caucasus republic in a 5-day campaign with minimal casualties (Allison 2008). Russia designed its Crimea annexation in 2014 such that it could have retreated and denied involvement, should the early stages of this operation be met with violent resistance from the Ukrainian side (Allison 2014; Altman 2018). During the start of the subsequent war in Donbas, Russia threatened overt and full-scale conventional military intervention in Ukraine, only to step back when Ukraine ignored the threat and proceeded to fight the separatists. Russian leaders instead opted to engage Russian troops in fighting, but they used significantly less than they could have, and persistently denied the use of Russian forces internationally and to their own population (Bowen 2019). During its various operations in Syria in support of the Assad regime, Russia pursued only limited goals and minimised the use of regular combat forces on the ground, seeking to avoid conflict entanglement and mission creep (Kofman & Rojansky 2018).



Russian leaders had likely expected an easy victory over Ukraine in 2022 (NBC News 2022b). When, in the first months of the invasion in 2022, it became clear that Russia could not easily conquer Kyiv, Russian leaders apparently changed plans and gave up ground to focus on Ukraine's southern and eastern regions. As of June 2022, the Russian elite has still shied away from publicly referring to the war as a war. It has also not enacted general mobilisation, depriving itself from logistic and legal means to mobilise fighting power more effectively. Both these measures are arguably meant to minimise public discontent over the conflict.

The German economy's formidable clout and its many interconnections with that of Russia (gas, other trade, foreign direct investments) gave Berlin various means to harm Russian economic interests through sanctions. Russian exports of natural gas to Germany played a key role here. Russian energy exports are extremely important for the Kremlin's ability to fund generous welfare programmes, provide rents for elites and maintain its military and security services. For example, from 2005 to 2014, through various economic crises and fluctuating energy prices, oil and gas tax revenue consistently comprised about 40 percent of total Russian government revenue (Miller 2018: 40). Gas plays a key role in this income. For example, gas sales alone accounted for over five percent of Russia's gross domestic product in 2018 (Westphal 2020: 409). Europe is by far Russia's most important gas customer. For example, in 2020, 72 percent of Russian gas exports went to European OECD states. With 16 percent alone, Germany was by far the biggest buyer (EIA 2021: 12). Indeed, since 2013, over 20 percent of all Russian gas exports went to Germany alone (Westphal 2020: 418).

Russia also relied on Germany for significant volumes in other areas of trade. In 2020, Germany alone accounted for 10 percent of Russian goods imports and 5.5 percent of Russian goods exports. Struggling to modernise its economy and diversify beyond energy exports, Russia is particularly dependent on importing sophisticated products that Germany excels at (especially machines, chemical products, electronics, cars and car parts) (GTAI Germany Trade and Invest 2021). Lastly, Germany is a key provider of foreign direct investment in Russia, with a volume of 24 billion Euros in 2019, comprising about 4 percent of Russia's overall volume in 2021 (GTAI Germany Trade and Invest 2021).

Germany also had significant military capabilities with which it could have affected the utility calculus of Russian leaders. As neither Germany nor any NATO ally had ever seriously considered sending their own troops to Ukraine or threaten military strikes against Russia to increase deterrence, such a scenario is not considered here.

However, Germany could have significantly increased Ukraine's own ability to resist Russian military advances and inflict casualties as well as material losses in the case of a Russian invasion, thereby increasing deterrence. As many al-



lies had done so before the invasion, this policy option warrants consideration. Ukraine boasts a population of about 40 million people that, since the annexation of Crimea and the start of the hybrid war in Donbas in 2014, have gotten increasingly patriotic. While Ukraine has since modernised its armed forces, it has lacked the wealth to afford high volumes of modern weapons (Polyakov 2018). Despite its reputation for avoiding the use of military means in foreign policy, Germany is a major manufacturer and exporter of military hardware, ranking as the world's fourth-largest arms exporter, with historic record sales in 2021 (DW.COM 2021). Combined with its wealth, this industrial infrastructure put Germany in a suitable position to significantly bolster Ukraine's ability to inflict losses on Russia.

In sum, Germany could have feasibly used arms deliveries and the threat of sanctions to significantly increase the Russian leadership's perceived costs and risks of invading Ukraine. Hence, Germany's potential contributions to deterrence over Ukraine were considerable. The next section analyses to what extent German policy translated these capabilities into actual deterrent threats.

### **Actual deterrence contributions**

Overall, German economic stakes in Ukraine were arguably miniscule, adding little credibility to deterrent threats. To be sure, for Germany, Ukraine did represent a source of cheap and skilled labour, due to the country's geographic proximity, large population, low average incomes and high education. Furthermore, with rising incomes, Ukraine could also develop into a significant nearby market for German goods and services. Nonetheless, calculating the share in Germany's overall trade volume in 2021 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2022), Ukraine represented only .3 percent, negligible compared to Germany's trade with the rest of the EU (well over 50 percent), China (9.5), the United States (7.5) and even with Russia (2.3). Thus, Germany's actual deterrence contributions were largely a function of the specific policies and rhetoric it adopted over its two main deterrent assets.

### *Military measures*

German foreign policy, as opposed to that of other European middle powers such as France and the United Kingdom, has long been sceptical of military measures, including sending arms to factions that violate human rights or are engaged in military conflict (e.g. Eberle & Handl 2020). Berlin's track record before the 2021 federal election might have well served as an indicator that Germany would be hesitant to send arms to Ukraine.

However, recent German policies should have cautioned Russian policymakers against ruling out militarised responses by Germany. Germany did supply

weapons to potential and actual war participants in the past. Recent examples include the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, countries with less-than-stellar human rights records engaged in fighting rebels in Yemen (DW.COM 2020). Furthermore, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas in 2014, Germany's Russia policy has become much more militarised, suggesting that this tendency would exacerbate in the light of renewed Russian aggression. As attested by German and allied policymakers working on Russia, German policy started to align much more with NATO's stated Russia policy since 2014 (interview with high-ranking British Ministry of Defence official (October 2018); interview with two high-ranking German Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials; January 2019). Germany also became the lead country in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence Operation for Lithuania, contributing combat troops to serve as tripwire forces to deter and defend against Russian aggression (Driedger 2021: 100). This ambiguity of Germany's long-term track record on arms deliveries and militarised policies heightens the importance of the German elite's rhetoric and policies in the run-up to the invasion.

From December 2021 and well into February 2022, the newly formed German government clearly signalled it was opposed to sending weapons to bolster Ukraine's deterrent capabilities, even though Ukraine and various NATO allies urgently petitioned it to do so.<sup>1</sup> The Coalition Treaty emphasised the newly formed German government would pursue a more restrictive policy of arms exports (SPD, Grüne, FDP 2021: 115–116). German leaders subsequently echoed the Treaty's sentiments that arms exports would escalate tensions, referring specifically to the case of Ukraine. In mid to late January, Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht stated that sending weapons to Ukraine 'will not help to defuse the crisis at the moment', and Chancellor Scholz, while expressing support for Ukraine's economy and democracy, ruled out the supply of arms (NBC News 2022a). German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock also

1 Arms deliveries to a target state can both deter and incentivise aggression, depending on when the deliveries are respectively announced and delivered. If arms are delivered well before the aggressor could meaningfully attack, they add to deterrence, as the target could now enact a greater toll on the aggressor. If, however, arms deliveries are announced for a later date, they can incentivise aggression, as the aggressor would calculate that striking as early as possible, and before new arms arrive, promises better outcomes. However, all available evidence suggests that, in the period under investigation, Germany only seriously considered arms deliveries that would have arrived before Russia could have attacked. Allies were aware of Russian preparations by late-2021. Preparing an all-out invasion of a formidable opponent (including moving, feeding and supplying hundreds of thousands of troops) is a much more demanding and time-consuming task than simply sending existing weaponry and maybe some personnel for training to a willing recipient. When Russia did invade in late-February, its military misfortunes arguably signified that, even then, preparations had been inadequate, suggesting that an even earlier start of the invasion was deemed unfeasible. Furthermore, other allies did deliver weapons to Ukraine well before the invasion.

ruled out weapon deliveries when visiting Kyiv on 7 February 2022 (Länder-Analysen 2022).

This policy was in line with German societal views. An Infratest Dimap poll on 3 February found 72 percent of respondents opposing arms deliveries to Ukraine and only 20 favouring them (Länder-Analysen 2022).

Germany's actions further signalled its unwillingness to contribute to deterrence with military means: In January 2022, Germany even blocked Estonian shipments of German-manufactured weapons to Ukraine. Meanwhile, airborne arms deliveries to Ukraine from the United Kingdom avoided German airspace, taking longer routes to reach their destination (Business Insider 2022; DW.COM 2022). In mid-February, news surfaced that, in 2020, German corporations had sold goods with dual usability for military purposes worth over 350 Million Euro – not to Ukraine, but to Russia (Länder-Analysen 2022). When German Defence Minister Lambrecht announced on 26 January that Germany would send 5,000 combat helmets to Ukraine, she emphasised these were 'equipment, not weapons' (tagesschau.de 2022b).

In sum, Germany abstained from threatening or employing any military measures to deter Russian aggression. Rather, Berlin explicitly ruled this out. This, however, was different when it came to the threat of economic sanctions.

### *Economic sanctions*

Germany's policy toward Russia under previous administrations provided some indications to Russian policymakers that Germany would likely enact further economic sanctions if Russia invaded Ukraine. After Russia annexed Crimea and started the war in Donbas in 2014, Germany was instrumental in bringing about, toughening and maintaining sanctions against Russia. This registered with Russian policymakers and experts, whose hitherto more cordial view of Germany turned negative (Driedger 2021: 100–101, 104–105). In subsequent formations of new German governments, 2018 and 2021, the respective coalitions maintained a consistent policy to keep the existing EU sanctions framework in place until Russia resolved its ongoing conflict with Ukraine in accordance with the Minsk Agreements (Driedger 2021: 104–105; SPD, Grüne, FDP 2021: 122). These past sanctions had a significant impact on the Russian economy. One study estimated Russia lost 2.5 to 3 percent of annual gross domestic product due to overall sanctions (Åslund & Snegovaya 2021). As the EU was, and is, Russia's most important economic counterpart, the major share of these losses can probably be attributed to European sanctions.

When the threat of a Russian invasion became evident in late 2021, German representatives did threaten early on to enact economic sanctions should Russia attack. On 15 November, the foreign ministers of Germany and France jointly

warned Russia that any attempt to violate the territorial integrity of Ukraine would have ‘serious consequences’ (French Foreign Ministry 2021).

However, the exact nature of these threats was vague and were tellingly non-committal on key issues, giving cause to doubt that they would be included. German statements did not mention, for example, the threat of shutting Russia out of SWIFT, as Scholz feared up until after the invasion that this would freeze significant German assets on Russian accounts (POLITICO 2022a). German parties outside the ruling coalition added to the impression of German hesitancy. The radical *Linke* and AfD parties opposed sanctions point-blank (tagesschau.de 2022c). In mid-January, Friedrich Merz, soon to be head of CDU and leader of the sole centrist opposition faction in the Bundestag (CDU/CSU) warned that shutting Russia out of SWIFT would trigger an ‘atomic bomb in the capital markets’ (POLITICO 2022b).

Even more importantly, up until days before the invasion, German policymakers did not publicly commit to sanctioning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline system. Indeed, in 2014, Germany successfully politicked to exclude the gas trade from EU sanctions on Russia, thus protecting core economic interests while accepting that other EU members did so as well (Driedger 2021: 101). The decision to build Nord Stream 2 and thereby enlarge the existing pipeline system was reached in 2015. This was only one year after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the start of its semi-covert war in Donbas. As the project involved German, French, Austrian and Dutch companies, the decision raised doubts about efforts of certain European states, particularly Germany, to punish Russia economically. Construction was finalised on 10 September 2021.

Nord Stream 2 was not mentioned in the Franco-German declaration of 15 November 2021 threatening repercussions if Russia invaded Ukraine (French Foreign Ministry 2021). The new administration continued this policy of omitting Nord Stream 2 from deterrent threats well into February 2022. For example, on 7 February, German Foreign Minister Baerbock merely stated on a visit in Kyiv that Germany was willing to pay a high economic price for sanctions against Russia and that it would increase economic and humanitarian aid to Ukraine (Länder-Analysen 2022). On the same day, in a press conference with US President Joe Biden, Scholz remained vague on whether the pipeline would be cancelled (ZDF Heute 2022). When Scholz met Ukrainian President Zelensky in Kyiv on 14 February 2022, he similarly warned Russia of far-reaching consequences if it attacked Ukraine. But Scholz also avoided any mention of Nord Stream 2, even though Zelensky called it a geopolitical weapon against Europe’s energy security (Länder-Analysen 2022).

This policy was in line with German mainstream opinion. An Infratest Dimap poll on 3 February found only 43 percent of respondents supporting new sanc-

tions on Russia, with 57 percent favouring exempting Nord Stream 2 from sanctions (Länder-Analysen 2022).

Chancellor Scholz did confidentially assure key US policymakers that the pipeline system would be sanctioned in case of a Russian invasion. When meeting with US President Joseph Biden and various Republican and Democratic senators in Washington, D.C. in early February 2022, Scholz reportedly convinced the senators that Germany would put in place a robust response in the case of a Russian invasion, including a halt of Nord Stream 2. Scholz had reportedly made such assurances when he had not yet been officially nominated as Chancellor and met Biden at a G20 Summit in Rome in October 2021 (POLITICO 2022a).

However, no German leader publicly committed to sanction Nord Stream 2 until late-February 2022, even though context implied that this might happen. On February 7, in a press conference with Biden, Scholz did not make definitive statements on the pipeline. Rather, he said Germany and the United States, in regard to sanctions, would act in complete mutual agreement (*komplett einvernehmlich agieren*). An invasion would be followed by 'tough, jointly agreed, and extensive sanctions' (*harte, gemeinsam vereinbarte und weitreichende Sanktionen*). Possibly reflecting coordination between the statesmen, Biden had said, just before Scholz spoke, that a Russian invasion would spell the end for Nord Stream 2 (ZDF Heute 2022). Similarly, on 4 February, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had announced wide-ranging financial and economic sanctions if Russia were to invade Ukraine, saying that the future of Nord Stream 2 would depend on how Russia acted. It stands to reason that von der Leyen acted with tacit approval of Germany, which, after all, holds major influence in the EU (Länder-Analysen 2022; Reuters 2022).

Further signs suggested Germany might halt the pipeline, though they were far from explicit and clear. In mid-January 2022, Greens Representative Omid Nouripour demanded to halt Nord Stream 2 if Russia invaded. He was joined by Roderich Kiesewetter from the opposition-party CDU. Both are considered influential foreign policy brokers in their respective parties (tagesschau.de 2022a). The Greens, being part of the ruling coalition, had long called for a more robust approach to Russia due to its human rights violations and opposed Nord Stream 2, albeit for largely ecological reasons. There have also been long-term irritations in the German-Russian gas trade, in part because of resistance to Nord Stream 2 by other EU member states (Westphal 2020).

Germany did end up enacting sanctions and halting Nord Stream 2 before the Russian invasion – but barely so. When Russia recognised separatist entities on Ukrainian territories, overtly breaking the Minsk Protocols on 21 February, Scholz coordinated sanctions with Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron in a video conference. Scholz then halted Nord Stream 2 on the next day

(POLITICO 2022a). Also on 22 February, EU foreign ministers agreed on further sanctions against Russia, including a ban on Russian access to EU capital markets and prohibition of trading Russian state bonds, as well as sanctions against nearly 400 Russian people and institutions (Länder-Analysen 2022). As Russia had started to build up the prerequisites for the invasion months earlier, the late timing of threatening and executing sanctions on Nord Stream 2 can safely be assumed to have vastly diminished the sanctions' deterrent effects. Indeed, Russia invaded hitherto unoccupied Ukrainian territory only two days after sanctions were announced. Deterrence had clearly failed.

## **Conclusion**

By applying deterrence theory to Germany in late 2021 to February 2022, this article infers that Germany could have potentially added significantly to the risks and costs that the Russian regime would have had to factor in when invading Ukraine. The other main finding is that Germany's actual deterrence contributions stayed far behind its potential, as German leaders were much more guarded in communicating and specifying deterrent threats than were various other NATO allies. This notably includes the complete omission of military means and a refusal to publicly commit to threaten sanctions on Nord Stream 2 and Russia's access to SWIFT.

The study's findings yield supplementary insights into related areas. As other states had sent weapons to Ukraine and signalled large-scale retaliation, it seems worthwhile to explore why Germany (and others) adopted different policies. The results of this study and others (Spanger 2020; Driedger 2022) suggest that this is a combination of path dependency on widespread beliefs in the disutility of military measures to promote peace, the rapid and militarised way in which events developed, and short-term factors such as dynamics within the newly formed three-party coalition in Germany.

Of course, an overall assessment of the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict would need to fully factor in Russian revisionist intentions toward Ukraine, perceptions and risk acceptance as well as other states' deterrence contributions, and the effect of other policies, notably those of engagement (Nincic 2011). As this study shows, even the comparatively small sub-task of evaluating direct deterrence contributions from just one party necessitates serious conceptual and empirical work, which should caution both analysts and policymakers against prematurely confident interpretations about broader issues.

This study investigated the degree to which Germany directly used or did not use its own capabilities for deterrent threats, through issuing threats of sanctions against Russia, or transferring some capabilities to Ukraine to increase the efficacy of Kyiv's deterrent threats. Outside the scope of this study were hy-

pothetically possible, yet extremely unlikely measures that would exceed even the efforts of more committed allies (for example, stationing German troops on Ukrainian territory to act as tripwire forces).

Also not systematically investigated in this study was the question as to what extent German policy indirectly affected the resolve and credibility of other key actors. On this, the data discussed here suggest various plausible hypotheses: Due to Germany's formidable capabilities toward Russia, German behaviour might have caused some other member states to deem it safe and acceptable to support Kyiv less than they otherwise might have had. Others might have stepped up their efforts because they thought them even more necessary in the light of German passivity or because they were morally outraged about German behaviour, as in the case when Germany blocked Estonian arms shipments to Ukraine. Due to Berlin's pivotal role in the EU and NATO, German policy might also have incentivised Russian leaders to believe an invasion would not be met by strong resistance from either institution.

Another hypothetical indirect effect of German policy on deterrence over Ukraine relates to the Russo-German gas trade, which still awaits systematic investigation. Claims that German policy was long constrained or even driven by a dependence on Russian gas face various conceptual and empirical problems (Driedger 2018). The issue of transit fees does not directly bear on deterrence. However, before the construction of the Nord Stream pipelines, the Ukrainian transit enabled both sides to inflict mutual economic damage through blockages. If Russia had invaded Ukraine, collateral damage, unattributable sabotage or overt Ukrainian blockage could have disrupted the Russian gas transit to Europe, sharply diminishing Russian income and possibly forcing a hitherto reluctant Europe on Ukraine's side. The Nord Stream pipelines then provided an alternative route for Russia, minimising its risk of disruptions and diminishing deterrence over Ukraine. Notably, these considerations have rarely, if at all (tagesschau.de 2022a), been spelled out by Ukrainian or German policymakers, arguably because doing so would clearly imply that the respective other side is unreliable.

The results highlight that ruling out military measures can, within specific scope conditions, incentivise rather than prevent conflict. For Germany, whose foreign policy discourse has traditionally been sceptical of military means, these findings urge a serious rethinking. Strategies of engagement, institutionalisation and legalisation are staples in German foreign policy and have indeed been shown to promote peace, welfare and stability, provided the context is favourable (e.g. Kupchan 2010; Nincic 2011). But if German strategic thinking continues to not factor in that abstaining from threats and military measures can, under certain circumstances, permit conflict where it might have been avoided,



Germany and other states might inadvertently continue to contribute to crisis escalation in the future.



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