

# *The Changing Role of Germany in the Process of NATO's Eastward Expansion after the Cold War*

Yuxue Wang

*Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, 100010, China*

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**Abstract:** After the Cold War, Germany completed its reunification and became a country with complete sovereignty. Given the changing European security environment and its national security concept, Germany has reformulated its national security strategy to protect its security and its allies, promote European stability, and enhance its political influence in Europe. In this context, Germany regards NATO's eastward expansion as a key path to achieve its strategic goals. This paper uses the theory of Constructivist Realism to explore the change of Germany's role from active promoter to rational balance in the process of NATO eastward expansion. In the first round of the eastward expansion, Germany used its relations power to discipline Russia and promoted its acceptance of the eastward expansion through conflict cooperation and unequal transactions. However, in the subsequent expansion process to the east, Germany turned to rational balance and paid more attention to the balance of relations with Russia and European defense integration.

After the end of the Cold War, the European security pattern was profoundly changed due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, created a power vacuum in central and Eastern Europe, and Russia's power is relatively weakened. Germany has restored its full sovereign state status. As a country that has been at the forefront of East-West confrontation for a long time, Germany's national security concept and security strategy make timely adjustments to ensure national security. To this end, as a member of NATO and a unified sovereign entity, Germany has formulated the core objectives of its national security strategy, including protecting the security of its own country and its Allies, promoting the stable development of Europe, and enhancing its international status. The key strategy to achieve these goals is to expand NATO into Eastern Europe. Germany actively persuaded the United States to accept the eastward expansion and committed to balancing the relationship between NATO and Russia by promising to help Russia to join some international organizations, dominated by Western European countries and America, in exchange for its tacit approval of the eastward expansion. However, in the subsequent process of eastward expansion, Germany gradually changed its attitude from active advocacy to cautious weighing, paying more attention to dealing with relations with Russia and promoting European defense integration. This paper tries to explore the role and role of Germany in the process of the eastward expansion of NATO from the perspective of Constructivist Realism, analyzing the necessity of promoting the eastward expansion of NATO from the perspective of German national identity, and analyzing the role of Germany in the process of the eastward expansion of NATO from the perspective of Constructivist Realism.

## 1. Introduction to Constructivist Realism

Constructivist Realism integrates realism and constructivism elements and emphasizes the relationship between power, discipline, and the role of others in international politics.<sup>[1]</sup> (Jackson & Nexon, 2004: 338) Power has the characteristics of dispersion and grid, which includes the material power operation and the social relations and meaning construction.<sup>[2]</sup> (Xia, 2016: 99) It manifests as the power interaction in conflict cooperation and unequal transaction, emphasizing the integration and driving effect of power relationship. Discipline is the process of power display, and the means of forming the international order, which is reflected in the guidance and discipline of the international mechanism, and the process of discipline produces others attached to the discipline. From the perspective of Constructivist Realism, actors may prioritize the construction and optimization of power relations when formulating action plans and reshape the right relationship with other actors through negotiation or coercive means. In the view of Constructivist Realism, Discipline is regulation, and discipline is a means for big countries to regulate small countries. The role of others is the meaning of the mover, and the discipline of the other reflects the subject of the agent; the other also resists the discipline of the mover. Therefore, international politics is developed in the discipline and anti-discipline between the initiator and the other, and power becomes the bargaining chip and purpose of the discipline game.<sup>[3]</sup> (Gao, 2014: 107) Constructivist Realism holds: "When setting the goal sequence of the action plan, actors may even place the construction of power relationship and the improvement of their position in the existing power relationship in the specific transaction first. That is to say, the actor will consciously construct and transform the right relationship with the other through negotiation or even imposed."<sup>[4]</sup> (Ma, 2007: 153)

In the process of NATO's eastward expansion, Germany skillfully used its power to discipline others to reshape the European security order and enhance its influence in Europe. In the first round of the expansion, Germany worried once again becoming a two-group confrontation, hoping to promote NATO expansion and absorb the former Soviet Union member states to join the soft way to change the position of conflict frontier countries by promising Russia to join other western European countries leading international organizations, guide and appealed to Russia accept NATO expansion for many times. In promoting NATO eastward expansion, Germany actively promotes NATO eastward enlargement, encouraging the United States to accept the proposal and regulate Russian resistance; Germany also balances the interests between NATO and Russia.

## 2. German national identity after the Cold War and the need for NATO's eastward expansion

After the end of the Cold War, Germany was unified and became the largest economy in Europe. The DDR joined the Federal Republic of Germany, regained full sovereignty, and the state became more powerful than before. After reunification, Germany's territory grew by almost a third, its population increased by 22 percent to 80.27 million, and its GDP reached nearly \$1.9 trillion.<sup>[5]</sup> At this time, Germany was the largest in Europe in terms of economic volume and total population, except for the Soviet Union, and there was no doubt that Germany once again became one of the world's great powers.<sup>[6]</sup> (Zhao, 2022: 9) In this context, Germany's national identity has triggered a shift in the concept of security, and Germany intends to become the dominant country in Europe again. In 1994, Germany issued a White Paper on Security Policy, which stated that it would semi-encircle the security of Germany and its allies and prevent, limit, and end crises and conflicts that might jeopardize the territorial integrity and stability of Germany or its allies.<sup>[7]</sup> (BMVG, 1994: 44) In the 2006 White Paper on Security Policy, Germany set three major security objectives based on national interests: first, to maintain the security of Germany and its allies; second, to maintain stability in the European region; and third, to strive to become a world power.<sup>[8]</sup> (BMVG, 2006: 24)

First, the change in Germany's security concept has triggered the demand for eastward expansion.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of values, the change in the European security structure greatly reduced the probability of a large-scale hot war in Europe. There is a strategic buffer zone between Russia and Western Europe, namely the Central and Eastern European countries, further reducing the odds of Russian war with Western European countries. However, the CEE countries are in a power vacuum, and non-traditional security issues are beginning to be exposed. As a neighbor, Germany hopes to ensure its national security by promoting the smooth transition of power in CEE countries and realizing political stability and economic prosperity in Central and Eastern European countries. At this time, German Chancellor Kohl, Foreign Minister Ginkel, and Defense Minister Ruehe all advocated that Germany could play the role of European engine in NATO's eastward expansion. Prime Minister Kohl pointed out that the expansion of NATO is part of the Europe-wide security plan, and no new borders and new gaps can emerge in Europe. Foreign minister Kinkel, when mentioning NATO expansion attitude more resolute, stressed that we must expand NATO to the east because there is no external security impossible economic development. Defense Minister Ruehe also believes that the eastward expansion of NATO provides political conditions for the new members of central and Eastern Europe, NATO, and the European Union.

Second, Germany's national security strategic demand has triggered the demand for eastward expansion. Germany needs NATO enlargement to improve its strategic position in the countries on the front lines of the conflict. After the reunification of Germany, it was freed from the long-term tense confrontation and war terror between the Eastern and Western groups and turned from the front of the two military groups to the center of Europe. But Germany's strategic position has not changed substantially. Once another war between the two groups, Germany will still be on the front line of the conflict. Therefore, the expansion of NATO has not only improved Germany's strategic position but also improved Germany's security factor. Germany can not only obtain power resources from NATO's institutionalized relationship power but also construct a stable power relationship with the new member states and even transform the power relationship with Russia. Moreover, Germany needs to use NATO to deal with non-traditional security issues in CEE after the Cold War. First, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; second, globalization, which links the economies of the world to promote rapid economic development and impacts German economic security; third, terrorism, such as the rapid rise of Islamic State; fourth, regional conflicts. As a neighbor of Central and Eastern European countries, Germany's political and economic security will also be affected if these non-traditional security issues escalate conflicts. Therefore, in the power vacuum in central and Eastern Europe, it is preferred to promote NATO's eastward expansion to absorb these countries. After admitting central and Eastern European countries as new NATO members, NATO relations are reformed to achieve political and economic stability favorable to Germany.

Finally, Germany improved its political influence in Europe by means of NATO's eastward expansion. As a defeated country in World War II, Germany needed to exercise military restraint in case of being once again defined as a militaristic country. However, Germany does not have the corresponding military capability as a political power. In order to change the situation of economic giant, political dwarf, Germany needs to join some international organizations to gain opportunities to develop its defense. The White Paper on Security Policy issued by the German government in 1994 points out the strategic goal of national security in Germany: to safeguard the security of Germany and its Allies, to establish a European security mechanism conducive to Germany, and to become a world political power. At the same time, Germany can also develop its defense forces through NATO and reduce its allied concerns about its comeback.<sup>[9]</sup> (Tang,2021:23) In 2006, the White Paper stressed that the core responsibilities of the German military include contributing to European and international stability, protecting Allies, and promoting multilateral cooperation and integration. Germany's promotion of European stability and the protection of its Allies can be reflected in the process and identity of promoting NATO's eastward expansion, from active promoters to rational

tradeoffs. In Germany, promoting NATO expansion promotes stability in Europe and enhances its political influence in Europe. Therefore, in promoting NATO's eastward expansion, Germany's attitude has also changed with the change of its interests.

### **3. Constructivist Realism and Germany's role change in the process of NATO's eastward expansion**

#### **3.1. Germany's role in the early days of NATO's eastward expansion: an active promoter**

After national reunification, Germany acted as a promoter in the early stage of NATO's eastward expansion. In the early stage of NATO's eastward expansion, Germany actively played the role of promoter, skillfully used the power in constructivist realism, and disciplined NATO, Central and Eastern European countries to define and expand the boundaries of relevant powers. Germany first guided NATO to accept the issue of eastward expansion and expand its influence in Europe. At the same time, it used NATO relations to consolidate its relations with Central and Eastern European countries and enhance its power status in Europe. At the end of 1992, German Defense Minister Volker Ruehe included NATO enlargement on the agenda in the informal NATO Council, arguing that NATO should deepen its relations with central and Eastern European countries. Germany is lobbying for the United States to expand NATO in several important steps: first, the Rand report to propose topics and lead the direction of public opinion in the United States; second, the use of key public relations in interpersonal diplomacy; and third, the exchange and cooperation of policy lobbying by functional departments.<sup>[10]</sup> (Lv, 2015: 60) The purpose is to connect NATO members with former Warsaw Pact members through the platform to lay the foundation for eastward expansion. Later, Germany used the relationship power in European integration to train European countries to accept NATO eastward expansion. In 1993, German Defense Minister Volker Ruehe said at the Meeting of NATO Defense Ministers: "Central and Eastern European countries cannot be excluded from the European Atlantic security structure, and Eastern European countries cannot become no man's land in the concept of security. The EU should take more responsibility for rebalancing Europe's relationship with the United States and overcome the new danger of European fragmentation. The United States must redefine its national interests and put NATO enlargement on the agenda."<sup>[11]</sup> American scholar Lawrence Kaplan believes that the eastward expansion of NATO provides a perfect opportunity for Germany to resolve the hostile history of the conflict with Poland.<sup>[12]</sup> (Lawrence, 1999:212) German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel and Prime Minister Helmut Kohl believed that regional integration could be slowly promoted to ease relations with Russia. Although there are differences in time and implementation, Germany has generally reached a consensus on the eastward expansion of NATO. Germany's proposal was also endorsed by then-NATO Secretary Werner and included on the agenda of the 1994 NATO summit. In 1994, Clinton delivered a speech at the NATO summit and said at a press conference with the leaders of the Visegrad Group that the current question of the United States is not whether to expand but when and how to expand.<sup>[13]</sup> The United States will accept Germany's proposal and start the NATO expansion process.

#### **3.2. Germany's role in NATO-Russia relations: a reliable counterbalance**

In the process of eastward expansion, Germany played a balancing role in handling the relationship between NATO and Russia. On the one hand, NATO is imperative to expand eastward. Russia is unable to stop it. It can only allow the eastward expansion to happen on the premise of maximizing its interests. On the other hand, NATO expresses its ambition and firm position on the eastward expansion event through the three 'no' principles and the five 'no' principles. Although it seems imperative, with Russia's resistance and ability limit, it can only gradually realize the ambition of the

eastward expansion. Second, Germany hopes to not only realize the eastward expansion to safeguard its interests but also balance the negative impact of the eastward expansion on Russia.

Germany, as a countenance, uses power to balance NATO's relations with Russia. The contradiction between Russia and NATO lies in its eastward expansion. Therefore, Germany uses its power to integrate Russia's relationship with NATO, and Russia allows its eastward expansion through conflict cooperation and unequal transactions with Russia. The first round of eastward expansion of NATO was the territory of the former Warsaw Pact members adjacent to the EU (mainly Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary the three countries). This approach will inevitably cause opposition and protests from Russia, which inherited the mantle of the former Soviet Union. If the eastward expansion is expected to go well, NATO must handle relations with Russia. In this respect, Germany played a vital role in the Eastern and Western camps.<sup>[10]</sup> (Lv,2015:65) Germany has made many political and economic efforts to gain Russian support. Politically, in 1993, Germany and Russia established the German-Russia Forum to improve the relationship; in the same year, Germany stated at the 39th NATO meeting that European security should be guaranteed with Russia and not against Russia in principle; German leaders Kohl and Yeltsin, Schroeder and Putin maintained good personal relations. Economically, Germany gave Russia 80 billion marks in aid. Germany held several meetings with the senior Russian ministers between 1996 and 1997. Germany mainly met with Russia in three aspects: the integration of Europe, the eastward expansion of NATO to Russia, and the provision of compensation to Russia. German Chancellor often meets with senior Russian officials, said the expansion of NATO is to make Europe no longer split, but not at the expense of Russia's security, and even bring geopolitical interests and security; Germany promised to the Group of Seven (G7) into the Group of Eight (G8). In July 1994, the United States significantly adjusted its policy towards NATO. During a visit to Germany, Clinton said that NATO should consider admitting Poland and even other Visegrad Group countries before 1997. However, the United States wants to quickly determine the target country, time, and method of eastward expansion. But Germany, considering Russia, wants to keep the appointment gently. In 1995, at the Munich Security Conference of the United States, US Defense Secretary Perry proposed establishing a permanent consultation committee with Russia, and Germany proposed establishing a definite relationship in the form of a treaty. Finally, NATO and Russia established institutional cooperation through the lowest binding charter, the NATO-Russia Charter. The main objective is establishing close cooperation on European crisis management and regional stability.<sup>[10]</sup> (Lv, 2015: 67) At the end of 1996, Russia accepted the opening of the NATO-Russia security relations dialogue, but it was still opposed to the eastward expansion. After many consultations and negotiations between Germany and Russia, Finally, in May of 1997, Russia signed the Basic Document on Common Relations, Cooperation and Security between the Russian Federation and NATO (Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), allowing NATO to expand.

### **3.3. Germany's position in NATO's subsequent eastward expansion: a rational tradeoff**

After the first round of NATO eastward expansion, Germany's security needs were initially met, and its role was changed to a rational tradeoff, with a pragmatic attitude towards the subsequent eastward expansion. NATO completed its first eastward expansion in 1999; in 2001, it planned to include Slovenia, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria; in 2008, NATO planned to invite Georgia and Ukraine to become NATO members. (Table 1) The latter two expansion plans can be regarded as a continuation of the first expansion, aimed at the absorption of central and Eastern European countries. The membership of former Soviet members Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania has largely narrowed Russia's core strategic space. Germany is cautious about these two eastward



expansions, especially about the entry of the three Baltic countries, believing that it may touch a sensitive zone of Russia, considering its energy dependence and the need to maintain East-West diplomatic relations; secondly, as a European country and an EU member, Germany is more concerned about the expansion of the EU. Although Germany no longer played a direct role in the subsequent eastward expansion, it still served NATO's discipline on Russia by maintaining its relationship power to ensure that the training results were in its interests.

Table 1: The picture is self-made by the author

timeline	Countries invited to become NATO members	Germany's attitude
The first round of eastward expansion in 1999	Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary	support
The Prague Summit in 2002	Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	Against-support
The Bucharest Summit in 2008	Georgia, and Ukraine	Against

### 3.3.1. Germany's dependence on Russia for stability

First of all, Germany believes that the security and stability of Europe derive from the stability of Russia. In NATO's second eastward expansion, the United States plans to absorb Slovenia, Romania, and the Baltic states into NATO. There is no consensus in Germany on this. Kohl believed the Baltic states should join the treaty as soon as possible because Germany had a historical responsibility to these countries. However, Rue believes that the pace of NATO's eastward expansion should be slowed. If a second round of eastward expansion is carried out, the number of countries joining the treaty should be reduced to a minimum. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder came to power in 1998 and believes that the three Baltic states, as members of the former Soviet Union, will be involved in Russia's red lines. Second, Germany depends on Russia's energy imports and must handle its relations with Russia well in dealing with the issue of NATO's eastward expansion. Russia imports 38% of Germany's natural gas, 35% of its crude oil, and 25% of its coal.<sup>[14]</sup> Maintaining good diplomatic relations with Russia helps Germany to enjoy diplomatic facilities between East and West. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, the United States regarded NATO as a tool of its global strategy, using NATO and its allies to provide blood transfusions for the United States in counterterrorism. Therefore, the United States hopes to push forward the process of NATO's eastward expansion as soon as possible. At this time, Putin's government also followed a pro-Western line and expressed support for the US war on terror. Russia's position has led to a rapid warming of relations between the United States and Russia. In December 2001, US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Russia, and the two countries reached an understanding on the Treaty on the Reduction and Limitation of Russia's Strategic Offensive Arms. This treaty alleviated Russia's worries about the United States launching the 'ABM Treaty' and thus eased Russia's hardline stance on the issue of NATO's eastward expansion. Given the détente between the United States and Russia, Germany has also become active, and at the NATO summit in 2002, it began to actively admit new NATO members. In the third round of eastward expansion, NATO extended invitations to Georgia and Ukraine to join the treaty, but Germany took a negative attitude. The reasons are: First, Georgia has a strategic conflict with Russia, which violates NATO's criteria for joining the treaty -- there cannot be a war conflict with Russia; second, Germany believes that it cannot offend its close neighbor Russia too much, and once there is a bad relationship, the diplomatic balance between Europe and Russia, which Germany has always valued, will be broken; third, Germany is in strategic consideration, and Ukraine is Russia's strategic

buffer core area, and it is also the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea Fleet Command, and if Ukraine is invited to join the treaty, Russia will counterattack. Therefore, Germany strenuously opposed the accession of Georgia and Ukraine.

### 3.3.2. Attention on EU enlargement and security diversification

After completing its urgent security needs, Germany focuses on expanding the EU to seek security diversification. Germany realized the importance of Europe's autonomous defense capabilities as early as the 1980s and has been promoting European integration since its reunification. Germany promotes European defense integration as follows: first, Europe's defense capability can reduce its dependence on NATO and enhance its national affairs participation capability; second, the United States dominates NATO, and the EU is centered on Germany. The interests of the EU are the interests of Germany. The strength of the EU means that Germany promotes its status in the international community and increases its discourse power. In general, the defense enhancement of the EU can better guarantee the security and interests of Germany and better safeguard the security of Europe. In the 1990s, during the launch of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Germany took the lead in putting forward the construction of common security and diplomacy and reached a consensus between Britain, France, and Germany. Germany was also committed to dispelling the concerns of European independence and defense. It facilitated the relationship between Western Europe, NATO CFSP, and the EU to reach an agreement conducive to Europe. Germany also promotes the launch of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), organizing several relevant meetings in the EU and handling the relationship between ESDP and NATO. During Angela Merkel's administration, he advocated that NATO and the EU complement each other rather than oppose them. Germany's security comes from NATO and the EU. Europe should be developed into the core pillar of NATO so that Europe as a whole can play a greater role in NATO and achieve the goal of Europe's control of its security.<sup>[9]</sup> (Tang,61)

In summary, Germany's role in the eastward expansion of NATO has gradually shifted from an active promoter to a rational tradeoff. This shift reflects Germany's strategic consideration of seeking a delicate balance between safeguarding national security interests, enhancing European political influence, and ensuring regional stability. While using relationship power to discipline Russia, Germany also attaches importance to diplomatic relations with Russia and its defense autonomy within Europe, reflecting how the actors consider the construction, optimization, and realization of specific interests in action from the perspective of Constructivist Realism. The change in Germany's position reflects its pragmatic and flexible diplomatic strategy in international relations, aiming to ensure its security and enhance its international status while promoting the stability and development of Europe's overall security architecture.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper studies the transformation of the role of Germany in the eastward expansion of NATO after the Cold War from the perspective of Constructivist Realism. German national identity is constructed by the concept of national interests and national power; NATO membership is the extension of national power and interests in NATO; both identities serve the national interests. From the perspective of Constructivist Realism theory, Germany guarantees its national security interests and political influence in Europe through relational power and discipline. From the ontological level, under the power, namely under the specific social relations and social significance, Germany uses the relational power of NATO to safeguard its national security interests. Change its interests and ways; under the framework of NATO, Germany maintains NATO's national security by promoting eastward expansion. From the epistemological level, Germany, through discipline means to ensure its security

and interests, using the expansion of NATO to discipline central and eastern European countries, contain Russia; through conflict cooperation and unequal exchange for Russia allows NATO expansion, but also to maintain balanced diplomatic relations with Russia. Here, the significance of Germany's eastward NATO expansion is reflected in Russia's permission for NATO to expand and the compression of strategic space. Although in the process of discipline, Russia expressed its subjectivity through resistance and refused the expansion of NATO. But Russia is powerful and has power as a bargaining chip to rebel in the discipline game, but weakening its power is also the purpose of the discipline. However, Germany holds a negative attitude in the following two expansion processes. On the one hand, it is to protect its security interests and pay more attention to the European integration process; on the other hand, Germany believes that European stability comes from Russian stability, and too much compression of Russia's strategic space will stimulate Russia. In the process, Germany no longer played the mover role in the discipline, but Russia remained the other.

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