Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 7.03.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

An (un)reliable partner. Scholz's visit to Washington

Lidia Gibadło

Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with US President Joe Biden in Washington on 2 March during a working visit to the city. The head of German government was not accompanied by journalists or representatives of German companies. The talks were preceded by a brief statement from both politicians, in which they thanked each other for their 'leadership' in supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia. President Biden praised Germany for its commitment to Kyiv, increased arms spending and efforts to eliminate the country's dependence on Russian energy resources. Both leaders reaffirmed their intention to continue providing aid to Ukraine and underlined NATO's unity. There was no press conference after the meeting; neither did the White House and the Chancellery issue a joint statement. It was Scholz's second visit to Washington; the first one took place in February 2022, before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Commentary

- Scholz's visit was aimed at reaffirming Germany's role as a key US partner in the European Union and confirming American security guarantees for Europe. Since last summer, politicians of the ruling SPD party have been touting Germany's commitment to assuming leadership in Europe. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock declared during an August 2022 visit to New York that Germany was ready to embrace the 'partnership in leadership' concept proposed to the German government by President George H.W. Bush in 1989. This would mean that key decisions for the security of the transatlantic area would first be consulted between Berlin and Washington.
- The uniqueness of the US-German partnership was demonstrated by the fact that Scholz came to Washington with a group of his closest advisors, rather than being accompanied by German journalists and officials from leading businesses, as is the norm on trips to countries of strategic importance to Germany. According to media reports, the talks between Scholz and Biden lasted almost 90 minutes, took place without advisers and focused mainly on the Russian aggression against Ukraine. All of this was supposed to underline the special, confidential nature of the talks and showcase the unique personal bond between Biden and Scholz. Scholz's visit was also intended to reaffirm Germany's status as a key US ally in Europe, despite the fact that Biden left the country out of his trip to Europe in February 2023.
- In order to strengthen Berlin's position in US policy, Scholz delivered a speech in the Bundestag just before his departure for Washington, which summarised the government's activities over the past year, since he announced a revision of Germany's

policies, including in the areas of foreign affairs and security (the *Zeitenwende*). He reiterated his intention to continue supporting Ukraine, emphasising that Germany had spent €14 billion for this purpose in the last 12 months. Thus, even before his meeting with Biden, Scholz had already positioned Germany as the leader of assistance to Kyiv. At the same time, he expressed criticism of the demonstrations calling for an early end to the war that took place in German cities on 24 and 25 February. In the same speech, Scholz described China's lack of support for Ukraine and its refusal to condemn the Russian invasion as 'disappointing'. He also urged the Chinese government to use its influence with the Kremlin to persuade it to pull its troops out of Ukraine and called on China not to supply weapons to Russia. Scholz also stressed that Germany had been working to broaden support for Kyiv beyond the Western community, citing his trips to Brazil and India in this context. This was meant to suggest that Germany, as a responsible leader with global interests, is aware that the issue of ending the war and of the need to ensure Ukraine's success goes beyond the transatlantic relationship. In this way, Berlin sought to portray itself as a partner capable of delivering on the concept of a 'partnership in leadership' with the US.

- The reaffirmation of the partnership with the United States was also important in view of America's impatience with Germany's restrained stance on the issue of providing greater military support to Kyiv and making this support conditional on similar assistance from the US. Just before Scholz's visit, President Biden's national security advisor Jake Sullivan indicated that the German government had made its approval of the transfer of Leopard tanks to Ukraine conditional on a similar US move involving its Abrams tanks. The Chancellery denied that such a link existed. The German government is also concerned about the consequences of the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, both in the military and economic arenas (see '*A dangerous resemblance. Moves to revise Germany's China policy*'). Therefore, the aim of the visit for Germany may have been to gain insight into Washington's plans towards China, while the White House may have been seeking to gauge what Germany's position would be should the US impose sanctions on China over its potential military support for Russia.