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published by
THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

The Global Zeitenwende

How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era

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January/February 2023



Chancellor Olaf Scholz during a television interview in Bali, Indonesia, November 2022

Kay Nietfeld / Getty Images

The world is facing a *Zeitenwende*: an epochal tectonic shift. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has put an end to an era. New powers have emerged or reemerged, including an economically strong and politically assertive China. In this new multipolar world, different countries and models of government are competing for power and influence.

For its part, Germany is doing everything it can to defend and foster an international order based on the principles of the UN Charter. Its democracy, security, and

prosperity depend on binding power to common rules. That is why Germans are intent on becoming the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be, a bridge builder within the European Union and an advocate for multilateral solutions to global problems. This is the only way for Germany to successfully navigate the geopolitical rifts of our time.

The *Zeitenwende* goes beyond the war in Ukraine and beyond the issue of European security. The central question is this: How can we, as Europeans and as the European Union, remain independent actors in an increasingly multipolar world?

Germany and Europe can help defend the rules-based international order without succumbing to the fatalistic view that the world is doomed to once again separate into competing blocs. My country's history gives it a special responsibility to fight the forces of fascism, authoritarianism, and imperialism. At the same time, our experience of being split in half during an ideological and geopolitical contest gives us a particular appreciation of the risks of a new cold war.

END OF AN ERA

For most of the world, the three decades since the Iron Curtain fell have been a period of relative peace and prosperity. Technological advances have created an unprecedented level of connectivity and cooperation. Growing international trade, globe-spanning value and production chains, and unparalleled exchanges of people and knowledge across borders have brought over a billion people out of poverty. Most important, courageous citizens all over the world have swept away dictatorships and one-party rule. Their yearning for liberty, dignity, and democracy changed the course of history. Two devastating world wars and a great deal of suffering—much of it caused by my country—were followed by more than four decades of tension and confrontation in the shadow of possible nuclear annihilation. But by the 1990s, it seemed that a more resilient world order had finally taken hold.

Germans, in particular, could count their blessings. In November 1989, the Berlin Wall was brought down by the brave citizens of East Germany. Only 11 months later, the country was reunified, thanks to far-sighted politicians and support from partners in both the West and the East. Finally, “what belongs together could grow together,” as former German Chancellor Willy Brandt put it shortly after the wall came down.

Those words applied not only to Germany but also to Europe as a whole. Former members of the Warsaw Pact chose to become allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and members of the EU. “Europe whole and free,” in the formulation of George H. W. Bush, the U.S. president at the time, no longer seemed like an unfounded hope. In this new era, it seemed possible that Russia would become

a partner to the West rather than the adversary that the Soviet Union had been. As a result, most European countries shrank their armies and cut their defense budgets. For Germany, the rationale was simple: Why maintain a large defense force of some 500,000 soldiers when all our neighbors appeared to be friends or partners?

The world is not doomed to once again separate into competing blocs.

The focus of our security and defense policy quickly shifted toward other pressing threats. The Balkan wars and the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, heightened the importance of regional and global crisis management. Solidarity within NATO remained intact, however: the 9/11 attacks led to the first decision to trigger Article 5, the mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty, and for two decades, NATO forces fought terrorism shoulder to shoulder in Afghanistan.

Germany's business communities drew their own conclusions from the new course of history. The fall of the Iron Curtain and an ever more integrated global economy opened new opportunities and markets, particularly in the countries of the former Eastern bloc but also in other countries with emerging economies, especially China. Russia, with its vast resources of energy and other raw materials, had proved to be a reliable supplier during the Cold War, and it seemed sensible, at least at first, to expand that promising partnership in peacetime.

The Russian leadership, however, experienced the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and drew conclusions that differed sharply from those of leaders in Berlin and other European capitals. Instead of seeing the peaceful overthrow of communist rule as an opportunity for more freedom and democracy, Russian President Vladimir Putin has called it "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." The economic and political turmoil in parts of the post-Soviet space in the 1990s only exacerbated the feeling of loss and anguish that many Russian citizens to this day associate with the end of the Soviet Union.

It was in that environment that authoritarianism and imperialistic ambitions began to reemerge. In 2007, Putin delivered an aggressive speech at the Munich Security Conference, deriding the rules-based international order as a mere tool of American dominance. The following year, Russia launched a war against Georgia. In 2014, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea and sent its forces into parts of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, in direct violation of international law and Moscow's own treaty commitments. The years that followed saw the Kremlin undercut arms control treaties and expand its military capabilities, poison and murder Russian dissidents, crack down on civil society, and carry out a brutal military intervention in support of the Assad

regime in Syria. Step by step, Putin's Russia chose a path that took it further from Europe and further from a cooperative, peaceful order.

EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

During the eight years that followed the illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of conflict in eastern Ukraine, Germany and its European and international partners in the G-7 focused on safeguarding the sovereignty and political independence of Ukraine, preventing further escalation by Russia and restoring and preserving peace in Europe. The approach chosen was a combination of political and economic pressure that coupled restrictive measures on Russia with dialogue. Together with France, Germany engaged in the so-called Normandy Format that led to the Minsk agreements and the corresponding Minsk process, which called for Russia and Ukraine to commit to a cease-fire and take a number of other steps. Despite setbacks and a lack of trust between Moscow and Kyiv, Germany and France kept the process running. But a revisionist Russia made it impossible for diplomacy to succeed.

Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine in February 2022 then ushered in a fundamentally new reality: imperialism had returned to Europe. Russia is using some of the most gruesome military methods of the twentieth century and causing unspeakable suffering in Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians have already lost their lives; many more have been wounded or traumatized. Millions of Ukrainian citizens have had to flee their homes, seeking refuge in Poland and other European countries; one million of them have come to Germany. Russian artillery, missiles, and bombs have reduced Ukrainian homes, schools, and hospitals to rubble. Mariupol, Irpin, Kherson, Izyum: these places will forever serve to remind the world of Russia's crimes—and the perpetrators must be brought to justice.

But the impact of Russia's war goes beyond Ukraine. When Putin gave the order to attack, he shattered a European and international peace architecture that had taken decades to build. Under Putin's leadership, Russia has defied even the most basic principles of international law as enshrined in the UN Charter: the renunciation of the use of force as a means of international policy and the pledge to respect the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all countries. Acting as an imperial power, Russia now seeks to redraw borders by force and to divide the world, once again, into blocs and spheres of influence.

A STRONGER EUROPE

The world must not let Putin get his way; Russia's revanchist imperialism must be stopped. The crucial role for Germany at this moment is to step up as one of the main providers of security in Europe by investing in our military, strengthening the

European defense industry, beefing up our military presence on NATO's eastern flank, and training and equipping Ukraine's armed forces.

Germany's new role will require a new strategic culture, and the national security strategy that my government will adopt a few months from now will reflect this fact. For the last three decades, decisions regarding Germany's security and the equipment of the country's armed forces were taken against the backdrop of a Europe at peace. Now, the guiding question will be which threats we and our allies must confront in Europe, most immediately from Russia. These include potential assaults on allied territory, cyberwarfare, and even the remote chance of a nuclear attack, which Putin has not so subtly threatened.

The transatlantic partnership is and remains vital to confronting these challenges. U.S. President Joe Biden and his administration deserve praise for building and investing in strong partnerships and alliances across the globe. But a balanced and resilient transatlantic partnership also requires that Germany and Europe play active roles. One of the first decisions that my government made in the aftermath of Russia's attack on Ukraine was to designate a special fund of approximately \$100 billion to better equip our armed forces, the Bundeswehr. We even changed our constitution to set up this fund. This decision marks the starkest change in German security policy since the establishment of the Bundeswehr in 1955. Our soldiers will receive the political support, materials, and capabilities they need to defend our country and our allies. The goal is a Bundeswehr that we and our allies can rely on. To achieve it, Germany will invest two percent of our gross domestic product in our defense.



German members of the NATO Response Force in Baumholder, Germany, November 2022
Wolfgang Rattay / Reuters

These changes reflect a new mindset in German society. Today, a large majority of Germans agree that their country needs an army able and ready to deter its adversaries and defend itself and its allies. Germans stand with Ukrainians as they defend their country against Russian aggression. From 2014 to 2020, Germany was Ukraine's largest source of private investments and government assistance combined. And since Russia's invasion began, Germany has boosted its financial and humanitarian support for Ukraine and has helped coordinate the international response while holding the presidency of the G-7.

The *Zeitenwende* also led my government to reconsider a decades-old, well-established principle of German policy on arms exports. Today, for the first time in Germany's recent history, we are delivering weapons into a war fought between two countries. In my exchanges with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, I have made one thing very clear: Germany will sustain its efforts to support Ukraine for as long as necessary. What Ukraine needs most today are artillery and air-defense systems, and that is precisely what Germany is delivering, in close coordination with our allies and partners. German support to Ukraine also includes antitank weapons, armored troop carriers, antiaircraft guns and missiles, and counterbattery radar systems. A new EU mission will offer training for up to 15,000 Ukrainian troops, including up to 5,000—an entire brigade—in Germany. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic, Greece, Slovakia, and Slovenia have delivered or have pledged to deliver around 100 Soviet-era main battle tanks to Ukraine; Germany, in turn, will then provide those countries with refurbished German tanks. This way, Ukraine is receiving tanks that Ukrainian forces know well and have experience using and that can be easily integrated into Ukraine's existing logistics and maintenance schemes.

NATO's actions must not lead to a direct confrontation with Russia, but the alliance must credibly deter further Russian aggression. To that end, Germany has significantly increased its presence on NATO's eastern flank, reinforcing the German-led NATO battle group in Lithuania and designating a brigade to ensure that country's security. Germany is also contributing troops to NATO's battle group in Slovakia, and the German air force is helping monitor and secure airspace in Estonia and Poland. Meanwhile, the German navy has participated in NATO's deterrence and defense activities in the Baltic Sea. Germany will also contribute an armored division, as well as significant air and naval assets (all in states of high readiness) to NATO's New Force Model, which is designed to improve the alliance's ability to respond quickly to any contingency. And Germany will continue to uphold its commitment to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, including by purchasing dual-capable F-35 fighter jets.

Our message to Moscow is very clear: we are determined to defend every single inch of NATO territory against any possible aggression. We will honor NATO's solemn pledge that an attack on any one ally will be considered an attack on the entire alliance.

We have also made it clear to Russia that its recent rhetoric concerning nuclear weapons is reckless and irresponsible. When I visited Beijing in November, Chinese President Xi Jinping and I concurred that threatening the use of nuclear weapons was unacceptable and that the use of such horrific weapons would cross a redline that humankind has rightly drawn. Putin should mark these words.

Our message to Moscow is very clear: we are determined to defend every single inch of NATO territory.

Among the many miscalculations that Putin has made is his bet that the invasion of Ukraine would strain relations among his adversaries. In fact, the reverse has happened: the EU and the transatlantic alliance are stronger than ever before. Nowhere is this more evident than in the unprecedented economic sanctions that Russia is facing. It was clear from the outset of the war that these sanctions would have to be in place for a long time, as their effectiveness increases with each passing week. Putin needs to understand that not a single sanction will be lifted should Russia try to dictate the terms of a peace deal.

All the leaders of the G-7 countries have commended Zelensky's readiness for a just peace that respects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and safeguards Ukraine's ability to defend itself in the future. In coordination with our partners, Germany stands ready to reach arrangements to sustain Ukraine's security as part of a potential postwar peace settlement. We will not, however, accept the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory, poorly disguised by sham referendums. To end this war, Russia must withdraw its troops.

GOOD FOR THE CLIMATE, BAD FOR RUSSIA

Russia's war has not only unified the EU, NATO, and the G-7 in opposition to his aggression; it has also catalyzed changes in economic and energy policy that will hurt Russia in the long run—and give a boost to the vital transition to clean energy that was already underway. Right after taking office as German chancellor in December 2021, I asked my advisers whether we had a plan in place should Russia decide to stop its gas deliveries to Europe. The answer was no, even though we had become dangerously dependent on Russian gas deliveries.

We immediately started preparing for the worst-case scenario. In the days before Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine, Germany suspended the certification of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which was set to significantly increase Russian gas supplies to Europe. In February 2022, plans were already on the table to import liquefied natural gas from the global market outside Europe—and in the coming months, the first floating LNG terminals will go into service on the German coast.

The worst-case scenario soon materialized, as Putin decided to weaponize energy by cutting supplies to Germany and the rest of Europe. But Germany has now completely phased out the importation of Russian coal, and EU imports of Russian oil will soon end. We have learned our lesson: Europe's security relies on diversifying its energy suppliers and routes and on investing in energy independence. In September, the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines drove home that message.

To bridge any potential energy shortages in Germany and Europe as a whole, my government is bringing coal-fired power plants back onto the grid temporarily and allowing German nuclear power plants to operate longer than originally planned. We have also mandated that privately owned gas storage facilities meet progressively higher minimum filling levels. Today, our facilities are completely full, whereas levels at this time last year were unusually low. This is a good basis for Germany and Europe to get through the winter without gas shortages.

Russia's war showed us that reaching these ambitious targets is also necessary to defend our security and independence, as well as the security and independence of Europe. Moving away from fossil energy sources will increase the demand for electricity and green hydrogen, and Germany is preparing for that outcome by massively speeding up the shift to renewable energies such as wind and solar power. Our goals are clear: by 2030, at least 80 percent of the electricity Germans use will be generated by renewables, and by 2045, Germany will achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, or "climate neutrality."

PUTIN'S WORST NIGHTMARE

Putin wanted to divide Europe into zones of influence and to divide the world into blocs of great powers and vassal states. Instead, his war has served only to advance the EU. At the European Council in June 2022, the EU granted Ukraine and Moldova the status of "candidate countries" and reaffirmed that Georgia's future lies with Europe. We also agreed that the EU accession of all six countries of the western Balkans must finally become a reality, a goal to which I am personally committed. That is why I have revived the so-called Berlin Process for the western Balkans, which intends to deepen cooperation in the region, bringing its countries and their citizens closer together and preparing them for EU integration.

It is important to acknowledge that expanding the EU and integrating new members will be difficult; nothing would be worse than giving millions of people false hope. But the way is open, and the goal is clear: an EU that will consist of over 500 million free citizens, representing the largest internal market in the world, that will set global standards on trade, growth, climate change, and environmental protection and that will host leading research institutes and innovative businesses—a family of stable democracies enjoying unparalleled social welfare and public infrastructure.

As the EU moves toward that goal, its adversaries will continue to try to drive wedges between its members. Putin has never accepted the EU as a political actor. After all, the EU—a union of free, sovereign, democratic states based on the rule of law—is the antithesis of his imperialistic and autocratic kleptocracy.

Putin and others will try to turn our own open, democratic systems against us, through disinformation campaigns and influence peddling. European citizens have a wide variety of views, and European political leaders discuss and sometimes argue about the right way forward, especially during geopolitical and economic challenges. But these characteristics of our open societies are features, not bugs; they are the essence of democratic decision-making. Our goal today, however, is to close ranks on crucial areas in which disunity would make Europe more vulnerable to foreign interference. Crucial to that mission is ever-closer cooperation between Germany and France, which share the same vision of a strong and sovereign EU.



Nicolás Ortega

More broadly, the EU must overcome old conflicts and find new solutions. European migration and fiscal policy are cases in point. People will continue to come to Europe, and Europe needs immigrants, so the EU must devise an immigration strategy that is pragmatic and aligns with its values. This means reducing irregular migration and at the same time strengthening legal paths to Europe, in particular for the skilled workers that our labor markets need. On fiscal policy, the union has established a recovery and resilience fund that will also help address the current challenges posed by high energy prices. The union must also do away with selfish blocking tactics in its decision-making processes by eliminating the ability of individual countries to veto certain measures. As the EU expands and becomes a geopolitical actor, quick decision-making will be the

key to success. For that reason, Germany has proposed gradually extending the practice of making decisions by majority voting to areas that currently fall under the unanimity rule, such as EU foreign policy and taxation.

Europe must also continue to assume greater responsibility for its own security and needs a coordinated and integrated approach to building its defense capabilities. For example, the militaries of EU member states operate too many different weapons systems, which creates practical and economic inefficiencies. To address these problems, the EU must change its internal bureaucratic procedures, which will require courageous political decisions; EU member states, including Germany, will have to alter their national policies and regulations on exporting jointly manufactured military systems.

One field in which Europe urgently needs to make progress is defense in the air and space domains. That is why Germany will be strengthening its air defense over the coming years, as part of the NATO framework, by acquiring additional capabilities. I opened this initiative to our European neighbors, and the result is the European Sky Shield Initiative, which 14 other European states joined last October. Joint air defense in Europe will be more efficient and cost effective than if all of us go it alone, and it offers an outstanding example of what it means to strengthen the European pillar within NATO.

NATO is the ultimate guarantor of Euro-Atlantic security, and its strength will only grow with the addition of two prosperous democracies, Finland and Sweden, as members. But NATO is also made stronger when its European members independently take steps toward greater compatibility between their defense structures, within the framework of the EU.

THE CHINA CHALLENGE — AND BEYOND

Russia's war of aggression might have triggered the *Zeitenwende*, but the tectonic shifts run much deeper. History did not end, as some predicted, with the Cold War. Nor, however, is history repeating itself. Many assume we are on the brink of an era of bipolarity in the international order. They see the dawn of a new cold war approaching, one that will pit the United States against China.

I do not subscribe to this view. Instead, I believe that what we are witnessing is the end of an exceptional phase of globalization, a historic shift accelerated by, but not entirely the result of, external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine. During that exceptional phase, North America and Europe experienced 30 years of stable growth, high employment rates, and low inflation, and the United

States became the world's decisive power—a role it will retain in the twenty-first century.

But during the post–Cold War phase of globalization, China also became a global player, as it had been in earlier long periods of world history. China's rise does not warrant isolating Beijing or curbing cooperation. But neither does China's growing power justify claims for hegemony in Asia and beyond. No country is the backyard of any other—and that applies to Europe as much as it does to Asia and every other region. During my recent visit to Beijing, I expressed firm support for the rules-based international order, as enshrined in the UN Charter, as well as for open and fair trade. In concert with its European partners, Germany will continue to demand a level playing field for European and Chinese companies. China does too little in this regard and has taken a noticeable turn toward isolation and away from openness.

In Beijing, I also raised concerns over the growing insecurity in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait and questioned China's approach to human rights and individual freedoms. Respecting basic rights and freedoms can never be an “internal matter” for individual states because every UN member state vows to uphold them.



Wind turbines in front of a coal-fired power plant near Jackerath, Germany,
March 2022
Wolfgang Rattay / Reuters

Meanwhile, as China and the countries of North America and Europe adjust to the changing realities of globalization's new phase, many countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America that enabled exceptional growth in the past by producing goods and raw materials at low costs are now gradually becoming more

prosperous and have their own demand for resources, goods, and services. These regions have every right to seize the opportunities that globalization offers and to demand a stronger role in global affairs in line with their growing economic and demographic weight. That poses no threat to citizens in Europe or North America. On the contrary, we should encourage these regions' greater participation in and integration into the international order. This is the best way to keep multilateralism alive in a multipolar world.

That is why Germany and the EU are investing in new partnerships and broadening existing ones with many countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Many of them share a fundamental characteristic with us: they, too, are democracies. This commonality plays a crucial role—not because we aim to pit democracies against authoritarian states, which would only contribute to a new global dichotomy, but because sharing democratic values and systems will help us define joint priorities and achieve common goals in the new multipolar reality of the twenty-first century. We might all have become capitalists (with the possible exception of North Korea and a tiny handful of other countries), to paraphrase an argument the economist Branko Milanovic made a few years ago. But it makes a huge difference whether capitalism is organized in a liberal, democratic way or along authoritarian lines.

Take the global response to COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, some argued that authoritarian states would prove more adept at crisis management, since they can plan better for the long term and can make tough decisions more quickly. But the pandemic track records of authoritarian countries hardly support that view. Meanwhile, the most effective COVID-19 vaccines and pharmaceutical treatments were all developed in free democracies. What is more, unlike authoritarian states, democracies have the ability to self-correct as citizens express their views freely and choose their political leaders. The constant debating and questioning in our societies, parliaments, and free media may sometimes feel exhausting. But it is what makes our systems more resilient in the long run.

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Freedom, equality, the rule of law, and the dignity of every human being are values not exclusive to what has been traditionally understood as the West. Rather, they are shared by citizens and governments around the world, and the UN Charter reaffirms them as fundamental human rights in its preamble. But autocratic and authoritarian regimes often challenge or deny these rights and principles. To defend them, the countries of the EU, including Germany, must cooperate more closely with democracies outside the West, as traditionally defined. In the past, we have purported to treat the countries of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America as equals. But

too often, our words have not been backed by deeds. This must change. During Germany's presidency of the G-7, the group has coordinated its agenda closely with Indonesia, which holds the G-20 presidency. We have also involved in our deliberations Senegal, which holds the presidency of the African Union; Argentina, which holds the presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States; our G-20 partner South Africa; and India, which will hold the G-20 presidency next year.

Eventually, in a multipolar world, dialogue and cooperation must extend beyond the democratic comfort zone. The United States' new National Security Strategy rightly acknowledges the need to engage with "countries that do not embrace democratic institutions but nevertheless depend upon and support a rules-based international system." The world's democracies will need to work with these countries to defend and uphold a global order that binds power to rules and that confronts revisionist acts such as Russia's war of aggression. This effort will take pragmatism and a degree of humility.

The journey toward the democratic freedom we enjoy today has been full of setbacks and errors. Yet certain rights and principles were established and accepted centuries ago. Habeas corpus, the protection from arbitrary detention, is one such fundamental right—and was first recognized not by a democratic government but by the absolutist monarchy of King Charles II of England. Equally important is the basic principle that no country can take by force what belongs to its neighbor. Respect for these fundamental rights and principles should be required of all states, regardless of their internal political systems.

Periods of relative peace and prosperity in human history, such as the one that most of the world experienced in the early post–Cold War era, need not be rare interludes or mere deviations from a historical norm in which brute force dictates the rules. And although we cannot turn back the clock, we can still turn back the tide of aggression and imperialism. Today's complex, multipolar world renders this task more challenging. To carry it out, Germany and its partners in the EU, the United States, the G-7, and NATO must protect our open societies, stand up for our democratic values, and strengthen our alliances and partnerships. But we must also avoid the temptation to once again divide the world into blocs. This means making every effort to build new partnerships, pragmatically and without ideological blinders. In today's densely interconnected world, the goal of advancing peace, prosperity, and human freedom calls for a different mindset and different tools. Developing that mindset and those tools is ultimately what the *Zeitenwende* is all about. ●

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