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Decoding the German Zeitenwende

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With its war against Ukraine, Russia openly challenges the post-Cold-War European order. In Berlin in particular, the shock over the sudden return of geopolitics has led to a rude awakening. Germany – which had been 'surrounded by friends' for a quarter century – quickly has to come to terms with existential threats to its business model. Under the foreboding header *Zeitenwende* (turn of time), the new government announced nothing short of a paradigm shift in Germany's political, military, and economic policy.

For its partners and competitors, the cacophony of the German public debate has been difficult to make sense of. To decode the German *Zeitenwende*, it is imperative to understand the interplay between a rapidly changing strategic environment and the internal power shift, which taken together resulted in this break from the country's path in the past few decades.

External factors: a shifting strategic environment

At the strategic level, it has become increasingly clear that the *Pax Americana* is coming to an end. China and Russia are pressing for a new world order. The United States has neither the power nor the will to guarantee the unipolar order that evolved after the end of the Cold War.

Following the West's humiliation in Afghanistan, Presidents Biden and Macron have declared that the era of humanitarian intervention is over. Despite all the talk of 'system rivalry', the question remains what the West is still willing to risk for the defence of democracy and human rights. Are Western powers still prepared to enforce the responsibility to protect in the face of crimes against humanity? Are they still prepared to provide the resources for peace-keeping and nation-building to end civil wars? Suddenly, considering a much bleaker reality, Germany's 'values-

based' foreign policy seems out of touch.

The same goes for the reorganisation of the global economy. The Americans, weary of globalisation, are more likely to engage in trade wars than in promoting free trade. Germany, a major exporting nation, increasingly finds itself blocked from access to major markets or under pressure to decouple from geopolitical rivals.

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However, the end of the unipolar liberal order of the last 30 years does not necessarily signify the end of the rule-based multilateral order that emerged after World War II. After all, cooperation between system rivals within the framework of agreed rules functioned even at the hotrest points of the Cold War. Like the Soviet Union back then, Russia until recently was willing to conclude arms control agreements, and China likewise has a vital interest in an open trade order. It is therefore possible that the great powers will continue in the future with multilateral cooperation to contain conflicts, manage migration flows, and jointly counter terror and climate change.

However, this presupposes that the hegemonic conflict between the United States, China, and Russia does not escalate violently. Today, once again, the rival great powers could sleepwalk into another world war. The fuses that could ignite a global conflagration lie in Ukraine and in the Taiwan Strait. This is why in Beijing and Moscow, and recently even in Washington, there are more and more voices calling for new cooperation of the great powers that would guarantee world peace at the price of non-interference in rivals' exclusive spheres of influence. Is the price of peace really the renunciation of democracy and human rights? How is this compatible with German ideas of a values-based foreign policy that aims to defend freedom, democracy, and human rights around the world?

But even if violence can be prevented, the signs in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing are pointing towards a resumption of the Cold War. Germany will have to decide what political price it is willing to pay for access to the Chinese market or Russian energy. The disputes over Huawei's participation in the 5G communications infrastructure and the German-Russian *Nordstream 2* pipeline were largely seen as a US attempt to persuade its allies to decouple from China and Russia. In light of the Russian challenge of the European order, Brussels and Berlin now understand better that Europe and Germany need to mitigate economic

and political vulnerabilities, and enhance strategic resilience.

Three quarters of a century after the end of World War II, the US will only renew its security guarantees to Europe if the Europeans assume more responsibility in return. From Washington's perspective, two models of the transatlantic division of labour are conceivable.

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Either the Europeans participate in the containment of China in the Indo-Pacific. One possibility here would be establishing a 'Global NATO', committed in particular to preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. Or the Europeans take some of the burden off the US by assuming responsibility for the European neighbourhood, from the Baltic to the Middle East and the Sahel. In order to be able to take on this Herculean task, however, Europeans would have to enhance their military, developmental, and diplomatic capacities on a scale that was until recently well beyond the imagination of the public at large.

In Berlin, all these structural shifts have supported the realisation that German's traditional position in international politics is no longer tenable.

Internal factors: a shift in the balance of power

A government's room for manoeuvre is, however, not only determined by external strategic factors, but also by the internal balance of power between different political factions. During Germany's coalition negotiations it became clear that conflicts between different schools of thought run right across the parties making up the new government. It is therefore worth taking a look at these schools of thought to get a better understanding how a shift in the balance of power between them has resulted in the most significant paradigm shift in German international policy-making in decades.

After the dark Trump years, the *transatlanticists* are doing everything they can to renew the Western alliance. For example, American calls for a more robust approach to China are being accommodated by the deployment of a frigate to the South China Sea. And in order to reduce European vulnerability to Chinese and Russian aggression, defence

readiness and economic resilience are to be strengthened. Until recently, transatlanticists faced the challenge of convincing a public that is weary of intervention of the need to strengthen military capacity.

The transatlanticists have the backing of the *human rightists*. This school of thought is alarmed by the human rights violations in Xinjiang and the murders of Russian opposition figures. They observe with horror how an authoritarian counter-wave is rolling around the globe and conclude that a 'feminist foreign policy' should promote women's rights and diversity worldwide – and that the system rivals China and Russia must be robustly confronted. However, how to do this effectively beyond symbolic politics, given the shortage of power resources or international allies, remains unclear.

The *multilateralists*, who hope that a rules-based world order will bring prosperity, peace, and global justice, face a similar problem. They counter the blockades and infiltration attacks of authoritarian powers with a liberalisation strategy that aims to further develop global governance through the involvement of civil society. Trump's attempt to put the axe to the multilateral system should be countered, they believe, by an alliance of multilateralists. However, potential allies who share these values, have so far rejected anything that might be called an alliance, because above all else they seek to avoid having to choose between Washington and Beijing.

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Also coming under pressure are the *free traders*, whose hopes for 'Wandel durch Handel' (change through trade) seem to have been refuted by authoritarian developments in China. The increasingly narrow room for manoeuvre on the Chinese market and the Russian politicisation of energy trading have therefore led to a rethink in parts of German industry, which is now trying to reduce one-sided dependencies through diversification. However, the majority of German companies are still not prepared to withdraw from the Chinese market or Russian energy supply. Increasingly concerned about globalisation fatigue among the population, free traders never cease to insist on the importance of open markets for securing prosperity in Germany. However, it is unclear how free trade can be defended against global protectionist tendencies.

The *pacifists* are alarmed by military muscle-flexing and call for the revival of international disarmament initiatives and non-proliferation regimes. Their long-term goal is a world free of nuclear weapons (Global Zero). The pacifists recognise clearly the threat of war as a result of the hegemonic conflict between the US and China or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But they insist that an arms race cannot be the answer to these threats. Lacking international allies for a new round of disarmament politics, the pacifists criticism of the German government's plans to set up a €100bn fund to boost its military strength fails to gain traction in the wider public.

Under the maxim 'He who talks doesn't shoot', the *proponents of détente* continue to seek critical dialogue with Russia and China. Unlike the pacifists, however, they want to do so from a position of strength. As the heirs to 'Ostpolitik', they insist that there can only be long-term stability in Europe if Russia is also integrated into a common order. Their argument that no one can have any interest in a new Cold War meets with great approval in Asia. In the heated German debate after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, advocates of dialogue are quickly discredited as naïve or as mouthpieces of foreign powers. In response, they argue that such short-sighted friend-foe thinking is bringing China and Russia ever closer together. The crucial question for the proponents of détente, however, is whether partners for a policy of reconciliation can be found in Moscow or Beijing today.

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The *European federalists* are also facing a dilemma. Acknowledging that without the protective shield of the United States, Europe cannot guarantee its own security, European politicians have long been pushing for a European Security and Defence Community capable of providing security for Europe and its immediate neighbourhood on its own. Full-throated professions of faith in Europe as a geopolitical power cannot conceal the fact that the crisis-ridden continent risks becoming a pawn in the game of the great powers. In order to promote European unity, several dilemmas have to be addressed. A realistic assessment of the resources that European sovereignty would require seems to preclude participation in the American attempts at containment in East Asia. On the other hand, European federalists are alarmed by Chinese and Russian attempts to divide Europe by cultivating clientelist

relationships in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. This is turn seems at odds with a lingering willingness to dismiss Eastern European fears of threats to their security and sovereignty with a view of positioning a sovereign Europe as a mediator between the US, Russia, and China.

A sovereign Europe in the new world order

Under intense pressure from international allies and the German media to respond more assertively to the Russian aggression, the newly formed government needed a clean break. With its decision to end the typical blend of free tradist, multilateralist, and détente policies that has been the signature of (West) German foreign policy for decades, it truly ushered in a *Zeitenwende*, the ramifications of which will be felt far and wide.

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What this new paradigm could look like will be shaped, in late British prime minister Harold Macmillan famous words, by 'events, dear boy, events'. But the government's course will just as much depend on how the balance of power between these schools of thought evolves. For example, if the alliance between the human rights supporters and the transatlanticists remains dominant, Germany will enter more decidedly than before into 'systemic competition with authoritarian states' and will strengthen 'a strategic solidarity with our democratic partners'. An alliance between the transatlanticists and the European federalists, on the other hand, would tend towards ensuring 'fair burden-sharing' in the transatlantic relationship through the assumption of greater responsibility for the European neighbourhood. An alliance between détente proponents, multilateralists, and free traders would be more likely to seek pragmatic solutions to problems and to involve all stakeholders. For a 'disarmament offensive', the pacifists would need to woo support from détente proponents and multilateralists.

The list could be extended indefinitely, but the principle is clear: for the implementation of their core agenda, all these schools of thought need allies. Conversely, the new government is doing the right thing by not raising false expectations among its partners through an overemphasis on narratives which, in view of the reality of power relations, must inevitably lead to disappointment or miscalculations. Because quite how restricted is the scope for Germans and Europeans to assert their interests and values is now becoming all too painfully clear in the war on Ukraine.

In order to assert its geopolitical interests over the long term, Germany must use its limited powers patiently and persistently. In order to mitigate the pendulum swings that follow changes of government, a broad social consensus is needed in international politics. Germany can only successfully assert its interests in cooperation with its European partners. The widely divergent positions taken by our neighbours, which reflect their respective interests and vulnerabilities, must therefore be brought together on a common platform. Fundamentally, we now need a European-wide debate on the role of a sovereign Europe in the new world order.



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