

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE “ZEITENWENDE”

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Abstract: “Great Power Competition” is an expression which for the past few decades had fallen out of wide use. Talk of “Great Powers” was reminiscent of 19th-century contests over territory and resources but not something suitable for the 21st-century conditions of technologically advanced societies and international law. In today’s anxious circumstances, it is necessary to look at the current state of international affairs as it is, not merely as we wish it to be. Strategic competition among contemporary states, large and small, has returned to the fore. This is not only because of changes in atmosphere or because of any specific single but because of a change in the underlying correlation for forces on a global level. This essay analyzes American foreign policy in terms of the turning point in events in Europe and suggests what can be expected from American foreign policy in the period ahead. The paper focuses on what Europeans refer to as today’s *Zeitenwende*—“turning point”—in international affairs.

Principle and Pragmatism in American Foreign Policy

America has foreign policy interests which span the globe. American foreign policy must protect core interests at home in the first instance. This means balancing geographical regions and core economic interests throughout the world. American foreign policy has high priorities in the Pacific Basin, in the Americas, in Africa, in the Middle East, and elsewhere. Amid all of these many interests around the world, sometime specific trends or events arise which focus American foreign policy in a special way. Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 crossed a trip wire which upset the balance in Europe. The major international institutions which define much of what is regarded as the foundation for global international order, were to a large extent the direct outgrowth of Great Power conflict in Europe. Now, 78 years after the end of World War II, Europe is once again in the midst of a competition over territory, borders, trade and influence. The Russian-Ukraine war represents a turning point in international affairs, bringing the fundamental political and economic institutions of international stability under assault. Today, at a level not seen for nearly eight decades, the international community runs the risk of economic segmentation, political fragmentation, and increasing competition on a global scale. What can

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be expected of American foreign policy in the period ahead? How will the crisis in Europe affect other aspects of American foreign policy around the globe?

Some aspects of American foreign policy are based in principle, and some are pragmatic. While sometimes in the past American foreign policy decisions have been primarily inward looking and concerned about domestic changes, at other times American foreign policy has been outward-looking, activist, and concerned about influencing foreign events and strengthening relations with America’s partners around the globe. From the earliest days of American history, American leaders have been concerned about keeping a distance far away from European internal disputes and intrigues. President George Washington warned of European countries meddling in American international affairs.² President Thomas Jefferson at his inauguration in 1801 famously pledged American foreign policy to be concerned with pursuit of “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliances with none.”³

As America developed economically and industrially over the course of the 19th-century, America gradually shifted from a self-concerned and even isolationist-leaning foreign policy to a more activist foreign posture. The change in America’s attitude toward a more active role abroad was the product of idealism more than realism. Woodrow Wilson’s famous “14 Points” in January 1918 was designed to “make the world safe for democracy”, that is to achieve idealistic goals through realist means. America itself played little role in the root causes of World War I and World War II. The catastrophes of these two world wars forced the challenges of realism on American foreign policy. As wartime Secretary of State Dean Acheson put it in his memoirs, *Present at the Creation*, the challenge was to map a new course to the future while avoiding the miscalculations and misjudgments of the first half of the 20th Century.⁴ That would require the sobriety of realism, mixed the visionary qualities of idealism—pragmatism as well as principle.

Just as there has always been a mixture of principle and pragmatism in American foreign policy, there has always been a balance between continuity and

² George Washington’s Farewell Address. U.S. Senate. (September 1796). Source: https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf

³ Thomas Jefferson, “The Development of Foreign Policy.” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. Source: <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/development>

⁴ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969). Also see Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986)

innovation.⁵ Today the world community finds itself in a period of exceptional tension, uncertainty, and animosity. As Antony Blinken expressed his views when he assumed the position of Secretary of State early in the present administration in 2021, he noted that some principles are enduring. Blinken noted American leadership and foreign engagement are important to both the United States and to partners and friends around the world. “Whether we like it or not,” Blinken said, “the world does not organize itself. When the U.S. pulls back, one of two things is likely to happen: either another country tries to take our place, but not in a way that advances our interest and values; or, maybe just as bad, no one steps up, and then we get chaos and all the dangers it creates.”⁶ Surveying the international situation in the present set of circumstances, Blinken made it clear that the geopolitical perspective of the present administration is pragmatically realistic about the challenges it faces. It is noteworthy that Blinken said that the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century for American foreign policy is the relationship of the US with China. “Several countries present us with serious challenges, including Russia, Iran, North Korea. And there are serious crises we have to deal with, including in Yemen, Ethiopia, and Burma. But the challenge posed by China is different.”⁷ Blinken saw China as the only country that has the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system of the past 75 years.

However, the Russian Federation is attempting to use the dispute with Ukraine as the trigger to do precisely that—to challenge the principles of the international community, to replace the institutions of international cooperation, development and collective security of the past 75 years and supplant them with alternative institutions which answer first and foremost to taskmasters within the Kremlin. For the past fifteen years the Russian Federation’s leaders have been pressuring the diplomatic community with rising insistence to bring about the “redesign of the international security architecture.” The goal is to create a new concept of Russian security embedded in an expanded and enlarged “sphere of influence” throughout eastern Europe and elsewhere, ostensibly guaranteeing Russia’s core security interests by adding buffer states in all its perimetry. The Kremlin’s efforts to achieve this goal were viewed by many as merely a

⁵ Gregory Gleason, “Innovation and Continuity in American Foreign Policy.” *International Relations*. No. 1, 75 (2019): 51-69. <http://www.uwed.uz/en/e-journal/17>

⁶ Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People.” Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, Washington DC (March 31, 2021). Source: <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>

⁷ *Ibid.*

diplomatic initiative until 2014 when Russia occupied and then annexed Crimea. Even at that point, many European voices acquiesced reluctantly to Vladimir Putin’s arguments that Ukraine was an integral part of Russian territory.⁸ But Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was different. Suddenly Europe was for the first time in 75 years witnessing the images of ground warfare in Europe that most European today had known only from black and white newsreels of a period that most people expected could never return to Europe in reality. Europeans woke up to the realization that armed combat in the largest state in Europe was a nightmare, but not one from which they could reawaken. Rather it was a tragic reality which unavoidably forced difficult choices upon the Europeans. Newly elected German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced in February 2022 that “Vladimir Putin must not be allowed to win this war”.⁹ In detailed terms, Scholz explained to the world that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine represented a historical turning point—“*Zeitenwende*.”¹⁰

Steps Leading to the Turning Point

The turning point was not a sudden development. Steps toward this turning point for Europe began at least fifteen years ago. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Vladimir Putin shocked conference participants by announcing in blunt terms a revisionist doctrine of a new, competing world order, claiming “I am convinced that we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security.”¹¹ A short time later, in June 2008, then newly elected Russian President Dmitri Medvedev presented the draft of a new European security treaty.¹²

In the north-Atlantic region whatever enthusiasm there was for the idea of reorganizing European security lost its appeal when Russian troops surged into Georgia a month later.¹³ Still, the idea of discussing a European treaty was not

⁸ Article by Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.” President of Russia. (July 12, 2021). Source: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

⁹ “Germany’s Scholz at Davos: ‘Putin must not win this war.’” Deutsche Welle. (May 26, 2022). Source: <https://www.dw.com/en/putin-must-not-win-this-war-germanys-olaf-scholz-tells-davos/a-61938607>

¹⁰ Olaf Scholz, “The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era.” *Foreign Affairs*. (January-February, 2023). Source: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/olaf-scholz-global-zeitenwende-how-avoid-new-cold-war>

¹¹ “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy.” *President of Russia*. (February 10, 2007). Source: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

¹² “Speech by Dmitri Medvedev at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civil Leaders.” June 5, 2008). Source: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/d_ru_20080617_04/_D_RU_20080617_04_en.pdf

¹³ Speech by Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov at the conference “New challenges to the Russia-EU partnership” (12 April 2010, Brussels). Source: <https://russiaeu.ru/en/interviews/russian-initiative-european-security-treaty>

flatly rejected and European diplomats carried on meetings in what was later dubbed the “Corfu Process”. At this point the draft European treaty was proposed as a means of redesigning security institutions essentially with the purpose of retiring the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and asserting to European countries that NATO could be eliminated in favor of Russia’s earnest assurances of good will.¹⁴ As Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, described it at the time, “The initiative of the European Security Treaty is aimed at creating a truly open democratic system of pan-regional collective security and cooperation that will ensure the unity of the Euro-Atlantic region from Vancouver to Vladivostok and overcome inertia of bloc approaches.”¹⁵

But the diplomatic corps of the collective West came to suspect that the goal of the European Security Treaty was not so much to ensure the protection of Europe as to separate the European states from any reliance on the security guarantees offered by American military capabilities. Large parts of eastern Ukraine were infiltrated and occupied under the guise of indigenous liberation movements and humanitarian assistance programs, in a series of surreptitious and clandestine activities that gave new meaning to the idea of “hybrid war.”

Even as Russia’s preparations for military intervention in Ukraine were taking place, yet another diplomatic ploy was launched. In December 2021 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced and delivered two draft treaties—the “Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation” and the “Agreement of the Russian Federation and member States of NATO” to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.¹⁶ Both treaties called for Europe and the US to surrender Ukraine to Russia in exchange for peace. The Kremlin realized all such proposals for security guarantees for Ukraine and European countries in general no longer had attentive listeners in the diplomatic communities of the collective West. The Kremlin’s diplomatic initiative then shifted to the more ambitious effort to build global support by including Latin American, African and Asian

¹⁴ *President of Russia*. “The draft of the European Security Treaty.” (November 29, 2009).

Source: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152>

¹⁵ Sergey Lavrov, “The Euro-Atlantic region: equal security for all.” RDN. Revue n° 730 Mai 2010 - p. 21-28.

Source: <https://www.defnat.com/e-RDN/vue-article.php?carticle=5132&cidrevue=730> Also see “Article by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov to be Published in Revue Defense Nationale, May 2010 Issue.

Source: <https://mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1685829/>

¹⁶ “Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees”. Source:

https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en and “Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”. Source:

https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en

states in a collective effort to form an “anti-hegemonic community.” In early February 2022, just weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian and Chinese heads of state signed a treaty proclaiming, inter alia, the “transformation of the global governance architecture and world order”.¹⁷ The impetus behind the confrontation between the East and the West resulted from the emerging partnership between two major world powers, Russia and China, in league with a number of major countries such as the BRICS members (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in addition to a more indistinct group of countries that is frequently referred to as the “Global South.”

Russia’s drive to overturn the existing security arrangements in Europe was accompanied by gradually increasing criticism of the entire network of international, multilateral institutions that date from the reconstruction period immediately after WW II, the UN family of institutions and a broad assemblage of private and public financial and commercial international institutions. These are multilateral enterprises that emerged from the ruins of war to prevent the catastrophic calamities caused by World War I and World War II from happening again. Considered collectively, these multilateral institutions constitute the combined formal and informal arrangements that established the foundation of what has come to be known as the “liberal international order.”

The International Consensus at Risk

Multilateral institutions are by their very nature consultative rather than executive. It may be true that multilateral institutions may rarely function efficiently although they can, under the right conditions, function effectively. A lot of talk goes into any action. But the world’s multilateral institutions established in the wake of World War II have functioned for more than 75 years without a major military wartime conflict between major powers. That contrasts sharply with the history of previous international conflicts. This fact alone should be regarded as a great success, regardless of any shortcomings these institutions may have in efficiency or equity. Abandoning the basic principles of the post WWII international consensus runs enormous risks of tremendous global losses. In the 18th and 19th centuries, ambitions of states were kept in check through continuous strategic competition with on the battlefield or the seas. Large scale

¹⁷ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.” *President of Russia*. (February 4, 2022). Source: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> Also see: *Law-info-China*. Source: <https://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=8215&lib=tax&SearchKeyword=&SearchCKeyword=> https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202303/t20230322_11046088.html

wars took place virtually every other generation, either because of revenge from the past or anticipation of gains from further conflict. Such a plan for international “multipolar” competition is not a viable roadmap for stability, peace, and prosperity in the 21st century. Turning points come with unpredictable consequences. As a recent RAND analytical study pointed out, “The invasion of Ukraine is also likely to have profound echo effects through the international system, and the parallel rivalry between the United States and China, in ways that are not yet clear.”¹⁸

There is no doubt that many of the institutions of the international consensus may have been insufficiently supported and over-extended. Many international institutions have weathered badly considering the dizzying changes in technology and accumulating challenges to the objective environmental conditions of the earth itself. Institutional security frameworks designed in 1945 can hardly be expected to be agile enough to effortlessly adapt to such rapidly changing demands as the emergence of artificial intelligence and automated warfare in the 21st century. The myopy and miscalculation of the Versailles Treaty in 1919 paved the way to the tragedies of the 1930s and the conflagration of WW II.¹⁹ Mercifully, the consequences of Versailles were avoided in the post- WW II reconstruction period. It has been fairly observed that, after all, the framers of the post-war peace were naturally more concerned about preventing WW II from taking place again than they were thinking about what the world would need twenty-five, fifty or even seventy-five years in the future to avoid WW III. To discredit the present functioning multilateral institutions, supported by multilateral staffs and multilateral funding, for the purpose of creating new competing and conflicting institutions is a historical mistake. Abandoning present institutions and then creating new alternative institutions—those which will first of all answer to autocratic leaders for political purposes—undermines the basic objectives of a fair and effective international consensus.

The Kremlin’s policy is now to align with countries willing to join in dividing the entire fabric of international commerce and trade through creating alternative norms, institutions, commercial and banking activities, transportation corridors and communications systems. This effort to divide the world comes at

¹⁸ Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Competition: Great Power Rivalry in a Changing International Order — Concepts and Theories*. RAND Corporation. (2022)

Source: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1404-1.html>

¹⁹ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939*. (London: Harper & Row, 1939).

a critical moment. Innovative technological change of the 21st century has accelerated improvements in the movement of people, commodities, goods, and services throughout the world. Recent technological advances in intermodal transport and telecommunication networks have made it possible for people, goods, and services to operate more efficiently and effectively than ever before. Beginning early in 2020, the cross-border disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic caused significant social and economic strains in global infrastructure connectivity, but in so doing also illustrated how interconnected the modern world has become. The manifest benefits of the high level of global connectivity in the world-wide promotion of prosperity is apparent. At the same time, it is apparent that the technologies driving globalization are not without some risks and threats of unbalanced or self-serving development.

Integration—the formation of transnational economic and political relationships—is a necessary consequence of technological progress. Infrastructure integration has two distinct but closely related aspects, what may be called the software and the hardware of infrastructure. The “software” aspect of integration refers to the political and legal arrangements by which states interact across sectors with other states. The “hardware” aspect refers to the physical infrastructures by which this takes place. Both the hardware and software aspects play an important role in economic as well as political interconnectedness as well as segmentation. Institutions and arrangements in terms of software (policy) and hardware (physical infrastructures as transport and transit lines for oil, gas, water, electric power, and telecommunications networks, and so on) should be shaped to play mutually reinforcing roles—to connect, not to divide.

The integration changes that are currently taking place present as many opportunities as risks. Tuba Eldem’s, recent analytical study, *Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity: Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey*, makes a persuasive argument that “Among the many significant geopolitical consequences of Russia’s war against Ukraine has been the reinvigoration of the Middle Corridor, both as a regional economic zone comprising Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey but also as an increasingly attractive alternative route between Europe and China.”²⁰ Today these

²⁰ Tuba Eldem, “Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity: Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey.” Stiftung Wissenschaft

independent Central Asian states are occupying a critically important geographical position in the heartland of Asia. While these states historically may have played only marginal economic and political roles in global affairs, today the intensifying East-West and North-South strategic competition is magnifying the pivotal strategic role of these states in the years to come.

Whiter the New World Order?

The *Zeitenwende* is globally important. Today policy makers in Moscow and Beijing speak in terms of multipolarity, superseding institutions, and new alignments; while policy makers in Washington DC and Berlin speak in terms of rebalancing, pivoting and transition. Russia's military assault on Ukraine has permanently altered the correlation of forces throughout Europe and Eurasia. How do we interpret this change in the balance of power in the European and Eurasian regions? What does this signify in terms of America's traditions of pragmatism and principle?

Conventional approaches to explaining strategic competition are rooted in international relations theories. Conventional theories fall into three schools: realism, liberalism, and Marxism.²¹ The dominant school of thought in discussions of global strategic competition is realism. Classical realism departs from the assumptions and way of thinking exemplified by Thucydides and Sun-Tsu. Modern realism adds the elements of the Grotian system set in the context of the modern state. For today's realists the state is the primary actor in the system. The state pursues its interests and seeks to enhance either security or influence or power.²² Realists think of the contemporary international system as a field of competing units of various sizes and capabilities, struggling by means of strategies of self-advancement to achieve goals that are sometimes common, sometimes at odds with one another. Large and resourceful states can achieve their goals through partnership, influence, alliance, demand, and coercion. Small and less resourceful states find the strategies at their disposal more constrained. Hence small states are encouraged by realist doctrine to pursue strategies of aggregation, coalition-formation, alliance building, and integration. The modern

und Politik. *SWP Comment* 2022/C 64, (October 28, 2022), p.1. Source: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/>

²¹ Other schools, such as constructivism, exist but these other schools of thought tend to be derivative of the three main schools. For instance, constructivism is nothing more than a critique of realism. Complex interdependence is a critique of liberalism. Marxism is a critique of the Grotian system of nation-states.

²² There are many variations of realism. For a classical statement see Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Alfred A. Knopf, (1948, and subsequent editions). Also see Kenneth Waltz. *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw Hill. (1979 and subsequent editions).

international security architecture refers to the domain in which today's strategic competition takes place. It seems all very logical, if the assumptions are satisfied. In reality, however, they rare are.

The topic of world order is a subject in which a realist such as Henry Kissinger had an abiding interest. World order was the subject of his doctoral dissertation at Harvard University.²³ World order was a topic of much of his academic research and publication in his early academic years. World order was his principal concern during his career as Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor and then, later, during his diplomatic service as Secretary of State. Kissinger has returned to the topic many times in his voluminous contributions as a scholar over the years. In his reflections on world order published quite late in his career in a book titled simply "World Order", Kissinger offered a succinct and penetrating analysis of differing values, assumptions, and proclivities as they affect international security in contemporary circumstances. A life of thinking about and working for world order led Kissinger to a simple but inescapably important proposition—that "No truly global world order has ever existed." What passes for order in our time, Kissinger explained, was devised in Western Europe nearly four centuries ago, at a peace conference in the German region of Westphalia, conducted without the involvement or even the awareness of most other continents or civilizations."²⁴ Kissinger went on to note "The Westphalian peace reflected a practical accommodation to reality, not a unique moral insight. It relied on a system of independent states refraining from interference in each other's domestic affairs and checking each other's ambitions through a general equilibrium of power."²⁵

If Kissinger's reasoning is correct, world order is not something that is discovered but something that is imagined, created, crafted, reinforced, protected, and secured. World order is dynamic and malleable. Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, recently warned the world currently is hurtling toward a badly fragmented system where the East and the West risk being no longer partners but rather contenders, vying for control over the global future. Georgieva said the issue is very plain. "We have a choice," she said, "Surrender to the forces of geo-economic fragmentation that will make our

²³ Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* was first submitted as a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University and published in numerous editions afterwards.

²⁴ Henry Kissinger, *World Order*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), p. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

world poorer and more dangerous. Or reshape how we cooperate—to make progress on addressing collective challenges.”²⁶

A deeply fragmented world, forced into division by autocratic, self-serving and self-perpetuating forces, powered by control over key energy resources and newly emergent digital technologies, threatens to turn back the clock to a too distant past.

²⁶ Kristalina Georgieva, G. Gopinath, and C. Pazarbasioglu, “Why We Must Resist Geoeconomic Fragmentation—And How.” *IMF Blog* (MAY 22, 2022). Source: <https://blogs.imf.org/2022/05/22/why-we-must-resist-geoeconomic-fragmentation-and-how/>