

History and Policy Debrief

CHIOS x Körber Roundtable,
8 April 2025

Zeitenwende Challenges and
Paths to Renewed Order:
The Lessons of History and
Strategies for the Future

Key Takeaways

- Europe and Germany's *Zeitenwende* marks an end to their sense of exceptionality and must be understood in the context of a complex global reordering: Decision-makers must prepare for a world in which Western dominance fades and Europe must compete rather than assume privilege when it comes to security, trade, technology and norm-setting agendas.
- The concept of “international order” overlooks non-Western timelines and experiences: So-called emerging powers such as China, India, and South Africa are contesting Euro-Atlantic leverage; if EU leaders do not take the lead in reforming IOs like the UN and rebalancing voting powers, multilateralism is at risk of bending, breaking and fragmenting under the weight of rival ambitions.
- Europe's entire strategy rests on Ukraine's victory: Ukraine practices a deep, values-based form of resilience rooted in identity and survival, which goes beyond military strength. Sustained European military, financial and political backing is therefore self-defence and without it Europe leaves itself open to wider neo-imperialist aggression.

Overview

At the inaugural CHIOS x Körber Roundtable, 8 April 2025, thirty scholars, politicians, and representatives from the armed forces, think tanks and NGOs, discussed the historical and global contexts of *Zeitenwende*. Speakers included Robin M. Allers, Eckart Conze, Faisal Devji, Andrew Ehrhardt, Rosemary Foot, Daniel Kleffner, Nataliya Popovych, Margarita Šešelgytė and Kristina Spohr.

Zeitenwende in a European and Global Context

Zeitenwende has become the catchphrase for both a German and European awakening to the transformative historical moment we are in. Concretely, it was the then Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany Olaf Scholz's (SPD) word to capture what Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine meant for Germany, Europe and the world, in a speech delivered to the *Bundestag* on 27 February 2022. It was a call for support for Ukraine, but also a call for Germany to reinvest in its own security and military capabilities.

This, of course, in light of the collapsing long-standing German policy of energy dependency on Russia, relatively low defence spending, and of seeing the EU in terms of laws, economics, politics and values, but *not* as a geopolitical actor or security provider. The speech was received favourably domestically and internationally at a time when the US Government, under President Biden, was supporting Ukraine against Russia's aggression. It thus symbolized not only a German, but a European commitment to rise to the moment, together with the US, to provide Ukraine with the tools to withstand Russia's onslaught, to ramp up German, and thus European, military investments within a rebalanced NATO, and to defend essential principles of international law and Europe as a democratic bastion.

By then, it felt like as if Germany had finally come into its own, living up to its allegedly natural role in Europe and hence meeting the heightened expectation of its partners and not least its neighbours. That was the intent, but since then, *Zeitenwende* has come to mean many things.

Zeitenwende: A line in the sand

First, in a historical and west-centric perspective, *Zeitenwende* has come to mean the end of a specific, "rules-based" order premised on a closely aligned West, in the name of global trade, democratic freedom and Atlantic superiority. In this perspective, *Zeitenwende* is the struggle to defend the modalities of ordering that were developed post-1945 – and renegotiated in the 1970s and after the end of the Cold War – through a set of multilateral organizations like the UN system, what would be the EU and protected by NATO.

Second – and with time – *Zeitenwende* has come to symbolize Europe's uneven, belated and painful awakening to the new role it needs to assume to defend three things: (a) Ukraine's territorial integrity and security, (b) the peace, prosperity, values and politics of Europe, and (c) the broader international "order" upon which both nominally rest(ed). In other words, *Zeitenwende* has become a historical line in the sand; from this time onwards, if not before, Europe would need – on a national level, within the EU and within NATO – to recalibrate not only its expenditures and priorities, but its entire political mentality towards the dawn of a new and more dangerous era. Thus, the phrase has also become a yardstick to measure the vigour of Europe's response: How much "*zeit*" will it take and how full of a "*wende*" will it be?

Third however, and significantly, *Zeitenwende* might increasingly come to mean the starting point in a process where Europe's exceptional position and perception of exceptionality within the international order slowly evaporates. In this perspective, the old continent would increasingly adjust to and absorb the realities with which much of the rest of the world have had to contend with for decades (if not centuries) and often at the behest of the very west-centric order that is now under threat.

Challenging the western-led order

China's ascent since the 2000s has occurred in what is seen as a period of "intense turbulence" – indeed a period of simultaneous ordering and disordering – where the aim is to take on the role as an "alternative" provider of stability and global public goods. With this come new values, new power centres and axes, and new transnational and multilateral institutions that challenge settled norms and institutions, and the still influential idea (or ideal) of a global balance of power. Non-Western powers coalesce around this prospect, not necessarily because of their alignment with China's strategies and intents, but because it is a vehicle to redress the long-term unfairness of the west-centric order. This, again, is part of a long and complex historical process, where multilateral frameworks – like the UN – have *always* been an arena for cross-ideological and political contestations (think for instance of the process of decolonization) and never solely an instrument for a western or liberal "rules-based order".

Thus, while particularly NATO, but also the EU, are purely “western” in a global perspective, the UN, for instance, has increasingly been an arena to leverage the influence of what some term “the Global South” and others “the Global Majority”. Despite deep disappointments and the institutional imbalance of the current multilateral system, therefore, many non-Western states are in fact urgently concerned with institutional reforms.

To conclude, then, while *Zeitenwende*, from a European vantage point, is an abrupt wake-up call to robustly defend an “order” that has been its safe harbour since the Second World War, it also encompasses the psychological realization of being at a tipping point of a protracted, often violent process of global reordering. This layered reality of *Zeitenwende*, and the differences in how it is perceived, is a fundamental and persistent source of tension.

Europe’s Potential for Resilience in Light of Ukrainian Practices of Resilience

A second theme was that of European perceptions of resilience in light of Ukrainian practices of resilience. Resilience, here, denotes not only military capabilities and the ability to resist a conventional military attack, but democratic resilience (against erosion), societal resilience (against disintegration), political resilience (against inertia or paralysis) and economic resilience (against stagnation, decline or collapse).

From the Ukrainian perspective, the ongoing war is not primarily one of territory or reordering, but one of identity, ideology and survival. This means that prevalent Ukrainian conceptions of resilience are rooted in four pillars: (a) Clarity of purpose (recognizing the longstanding threat of Russia to its existence); (b) Values (rooted in freedom and peace); (c) Solidarity (recognizing that one people’s struggle for freedom and peace is linked with everybody’s struggle for the same); and (d) Belief in one’s own agency (recognizing that one is fighting for a spiritual cause and not for individual personal gain).

Thus, from a Ukrainian viewpoint, the order that “the West” is seeking to salvage or restore is and always was fundamentally flawed, because while it

espouses many of the core values that Ukraine now fights for, it also allowed Ukraine to be at the mercy of the Soviet Union and now Russia.

Russia’s hybrid war

The European perspective is more muddled. First, due to Russia’s hybrid warfare, disinformation efforts and the longstanding practice of working to undermine democratic societies, most European countries, while they *know* that they are not *directly* involved in a conventional war, are nonetheless *uncertain* as to whether, or to what extent, they are already in some kind of warlike conflict with their neighbour to the east.

From assassinations and cyber-attacks, funnelling money to online trolls, far-right autocrats and populist influencers, to cutting submarine telecommunications cables and disrupting critical infrastructure, Europe is not only engaged with Russia, via its support to Ukraine, but also because of the hybrid and non-linear war that Russia has waged for years.

Second, from a wider Eastern European, Baltic and partially Nordic (certainly Finnish) perspective, Russia’s territorial ambitions in Ukraine are seen as part of an imperial strategy towards claiming a substantially enlarged sphere of influence and domination. The Russian presence in Transnistria (since 1992), its invasion of Georgia (2008), its illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Donbass (2014) are seen in this light and interpreted against the background of Tsarist Russia’s and the Soviet Union’s imperial appetites.

Third, Putin’s Russia itself sees Europe – particularly with the EU and NATO enlargements eastwards since the end of the Cold War – as an expansionist and ideologized enemy. Putin has long loathed the EU’s universalist claims of “Europeanization” and – as he made clear in his Munich Security Conference speech of 2007 – equally resents an “Americanized” unipolar world. As such, it is evident that Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine and its hybrid war against Europe are both part of its wider *civilizational* struggle against what the regime consistently brands as a weak, woke and decaying “West” whose hegemonic hold on power has stunted Russia’s imperial ambitions for too long.

Tensions of European resilience

In this context, Europe has in fact shown remarkable democratic, societal, political and economic resilience. The fact that Sweden and Finland swiftly joined NATO, Denmark dropped its defence opt-out in the EU, and countries like Norway and Iceland are revisiting the prospect of EU membership is a testament to this. The EU's support to Ukraine equals that of the United States in terms financial, humanitarian and military aid, and greatly exceeds it when refugee costs are incorporated. This is the case despite the ascendancy of the far right in most European countries. The political center and traditional parties have for the most part held their ground – by hook or by crook. Also despite a historic rise of the far right in the European Parliamentary elections of 2024, they did not gain enough votes to overrun the parliament, and the elections also had the highest turnout since 1994.

The willingness to prepare for the potential of further Russian aggression, and to support Ukraine, has shown itself most clearly in the Baltic Sea region. After years of specialization, particularly geared towards delivering on expeditionary force capabilities within NATO in the “War on Terror” era, the countries of the Baltic Sea region, as most other NATO members, are rebuilding their capacity to engage in conventional warfare in defence of their own or other NATO allies’ territory.

Indeed, the Baltic states and Finland, as a result of historical experience and geographical proximity, have maintained a clearer understanding of Russia as a threat – they exhibit societal and civil preparedness for conflict, and have invested heavily in its conventional defences over a longer period.

Poland has bolstered its defence expenditure significantly: it now has the third largest army in NATO, and has been one of the most vocal in calling for European mobilization on the Eastern front, filling the *Zeitenwende* – so to speak – with real content.

Lastly, the Nordic countries have shown, both with their high share of financial support to Ukraine, their “unification” within NATO, and its increasingly close coordination of defence procurement and strategic planning, that they too are preparing to stand resilient in the face of Russian expansionism. This has only become clearer, of course, since Donald Trump took office.

With the Trump administration’s clear intent to downscale its military presence – as evidenced by the US seeking to negotiate a lopsided settlement between Russia and Ukraine, while pressing the Europeans to ramp up their NATO contributions and enforce the said settlement alone – Europe is now having to face the prospect of a further strengthening of its own military resilience. That is, not only its military capabilities, but its broader societal willingness to use them (*Kriegstüchtigkeit*).

There is, however, a fundamental tension in all this: All of Europe’s efforts to bolster its resilience, including NATO’s plans, hinge on Ukraine holding out against Russia. Europe’s proclaimed solidarity with and shared values in relation to Ukraine – towards ensuring its freedom, security and territorial integrity – risks being betrayed by the fact that the continent is preparing its own resilience on the back of Ukraine’s *daily practice* of resilience.

Yet, if Ukraine cannot beat back Russia, or is forced to accept a US-backed Russia-friendly settlement, Europe will have *practiced* defeatism: it will have belied its values, it will have abandoned its solidarity, and it will have failed to recognize that Ukraine fights for a “spiritual cause” that concerns us all. In other words, Europe cannot pursue its “defensive realism”, in the face of Ukrainian defeat, without making a mockery of its moral commitments, and it will at the same time have failed to see Russia’s imperial ambitions in the same stark light as Ukraine and many other countries do. This is the essential tension of resilience.

Zeitenwende and Global Reordering: Between Realignment, Reform and Ruin

The last overarching issue and tension is that of *Zeitenwende*’s relationship with global reordering. Here the participants of the roundtable shared both conceptual and perspectival points, which brought home the fragility of the very concept of “orders”.

The limits of periodization

In the west-centric chronology of 19th and 20th century international relations, one tends to operate with watershed markers such as “1914”, “1918”, “1939”, “1945”, “1989” and “2001”. These watersheds

demarcate recognizable eras – the interwar period, the postwar era, the Cold War, the “war on terror” etc. – which are often prodded either by the start or the end of conflict in Europe. Such periodizations are, however, mired in problematic assumptions. For one, the end and start of a period is geographically dispersed.

An additional challenge is that such periodizations privilege certain processes of development over others. The Hobsbawmian “short twentieth century”, for instance, centers the two world wars and the interwar period in a European perspective, as the age of violence and extremes (ideology and war being privileged), which was replaced by a much more stable and indeed prosperous Cold War era, whose tensions were resolved in 1989/90 to make way for a variation of the “end of history”. Ideologically, Francis Fukuyama and Eric Hobsbawm lived on very different planets.

Such a timeline fits uneasily with the historical chronology of anticolonialism and decolonization, for instance, where the interwar period marked no order at all. The major ruptures occur in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the 1970s is not a time of détente, but of global mobilization towards a new and more just multilateral order – an attempt that was sabotaged by the global north. In a global perspective, there was nothing stable about the Cold War period at all.

The short twentieth century equally obscures the longer and protracted process of Atlantic alignment that marks the *long* twentieth century, starting in the 1860s and perhaps nearing its end as we speak. Equally, it ignores the explosive rise of institutionalized multilateralism and international organizations – there are more than 6000 today – which are both testaments to time limited “orders” and sediments of responses to cross-cutting processes of globalization over the last two centuries.

Another challenge is that carving historical times up into “orders” belies the fact that many of the seeds of the modalities and challenges of a specific time-period are to be found scattered across past so-called orders, while other aspects might be entirely new. It is, for instance, impossible to understand the global collapse in American credibility today, without an appreciation of Jacksonian populism, American interwar isolationism, postwar McCarthyism, the US’ unipolar

moment of the 1990s, the unprecedented squandering of moral, legal and political capital during the Bush era with the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the demoralizing and radicalizing effects of the uneven handling of the 2008 financial crisis. And these are just some of the more “domestic” American roots and antecedents of the new era of global reordering we are in.

Beyond “The End of History”

It is just as difficult to pinpoint when exactly the erosion of the post-1990 “order” began – it’s perhaps not even useful. It is evident, however, that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not a *causa causarum*, but rather the most recent highpoint of a kind of neo-imperialism that has marked the US’, China’s and Russia’s international behaviour since the early 2000s. Indeed, the return of Russian imperialism has grown in the shadow of American interventionism.

Lastly, it is evident that the coming of new times and new challenges poses difficult questions to once established periodizations. Nobody speaks of “the end of history”, yet any talk of “the return of geopolitics” replacing the historical safe haven of the end of the millennium is deeply west-centric and misses both that many of the roots of the conflict on the European continent are to be found in the 1990s (the decade being seen as a historic humiliation of Russia by Putin for instance) and that globally geopolitics and atrocious war never disappeared (from Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone to Congo and Chechenia).

On the one hand all these interpretative precautions might lead us to the conclusion that we *do not have* a “historical language” to capture the global reordering we are currently witnessing. If that is a bridge too far, it is nonetheless important to keep in mind when analytically clarifying the traits of a specific order, and makes it useful to add to the vocabulary (*re*)ordering. We shall therefore close this brief with some of the points raised about the current processes of global *reordering*.

Looking Ahead: Policy Implications

Processes of reordering: realignment

The first point is that we are witnessing a global *realignment*, or rebalancing, of power. The dominant Atlantic grasp on the levers of power has been receding for a long time, while a loosely aligned group of countries like China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Russia have sought to challenge for the very same levers. The many IOs that have hedged and furthered Atlantic dominance since the Second World War are like sensory tools of this realignment: the Trump administration's decision to review all its commitments to IOs, signalling a partial withdrawal from the multilateral instruments it helped set up, should be interpreted in this light.

The question is whether the existing infrastructure of multilateralism will *bend* or *break*? Multilateralism is in crisis due to longstanding systemic imbalances *and* new, disruptive tensions in the international system. This means that IOs such as the UN are under unprecedented pressure as the result of deep-seated conflicts among its member states, increasing budget constraints, and receding investment in its procedures, policies and rules among key actors. The problem seems to be moving from disagreement with policy priorities within "the multilateral system" to disengagement with it as a *polity*.

Processes of reordering: reform

In spite of the realignment highlighted above, and because the multilateral system has not only been a vehicle for the west, but also an arena for the global majority to leverage its influence, many countries are looking to *reform* these organizations and make them fit for a new balance of power. The decentred, diverse and deeply institutionalized nature of contemporary multilateralism, moreover, means that we will probably not observe a clear-cut pattern. Rather, we will see tendencies toward retreat, reform and ruin simultaneously and at various speeds.

It also means that although the current polycrisis, particularly for European observers, reminds us of the dismantling of the post-WWI order, our current multilateral diplomacy, global governance structures and international organizations have both more experience of crisis to draw on and possibly more resilience precisely because of its global make-up.

Processes of reordering: ruin

The last point is that certain international actors seem to actively seek *ruin*. The challenge of *our* time is that both Russian and American policies of *reordering* are essentially – though differently – imperial in nature. Trump's casual offering of large parts of Ukraine to Russia to ensure an end to "all the killing" should tell Europeans that neither of the two want to uphold sacred principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Of course, the rules-based order has for long been anathema to much of the world because of its uneven civilizational applicability and the hypocrisy of its supposed universality. In this sense, Europe is simply catching up with global realities. Instead, we are moving not towards a multipolar world but towards an age of imperial contestation within a hyper-globalized but competitively *multi-ordered* world.

This puts the European *Zeitenwende* in an altogether different light: Europe is in the process of trying to straddle its Atlanto-centric past and its present predicament of being pressured between two nuclear powers that see the old continent as a bastion of wokeism, weakness, decay and bureaucratic rule. Europe needs to do all this while recognizing and responding to the global power realignment and the need for deep multilateral reforms in a way that neither isolates the West nor leads to the complete splintering of global politics into imperial spheres. This is the broader geopolitical task at hand. 🔴

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As part of Körber-Stiftung, our work is based on the understanding that conflicts stem from misunderstandings, lack of debate, and unresolved pasts. Our mission is therefore to foster international dialogue and a profound understanding of history. We believe that historical thinking helps uncover blind spots in international relations, provides valuable context for informed analyses on current geopolitical developments, and offers new impetus in times of growing international, political, and societal tensions.

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