Zeitenwende: A Return of History – Fragmentation and Contestation

Essay by Junior Ambassador Timothy Chan Ying Jie

Zeitenwende marks the immediate and dramatic process of fragmentation and contestation catalyzed by Russia’s invasion. This process follows from the decade prior to the fissures, disillusionment, and shifts in the world order with consecutive crises: the war on terror, the economic crises, the rise of China, unchecked Russian aggression, and the COVID-19 pandemic. To paraphrase Gramsci, as the new era in world politics struggles to materialize, it took Russia's invasion to bury the old era.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz was right in conceiving the process of this transformation into the new era of world politics to be a Zeitenwende. This Zeitenwende encompasses historic, geopolitical, economic, and ideological dimensions. It is chiefly characterized by the fragmentation of the old order and its struggle to form a stable new one, if there will be a stable one at all. The old era – the post-1945 constellation of the Atlantic Charter and the Bretton Woods institution – has given way to one of instability and contestation.

Zeitenwende is the turning point and climax of a transitional period of polycrisis the decade before. Zeitenwende can be interpreted as the return of history, as the end of the post-Cold War geopolitical order. However, one can stretch this geopolitical order back to 1945, in light of the fact that it is a resumption of an era of the law of the strongest and powerlessness of the United Nations.

The process of Zeitenwende reveals a fragmented world order. While the previous decade challenged the order with multiple polycrises, 2022 is the year when that order fragmented into various multipolarities. While the US continues to exert economic and military influence, it is increasingly dependent on its allies and partners to sustain supremacy. The new multipolarity is more constrained within separate geopolitical regions and geo-economic spheres but remains interconnected. The rise of middle powers – often regional powers that can exert influence within and beyond their regions such as Germany, Iran, Japan, South Korea and India – increasingly fills the vacuum as the US retreats. Zeitenwende reflects this as regional actors are now placed in the forefront of a web of polycrises – Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East; South Korea and Japan vis-à-vis China; and the EU in Russia’s war against Ukraine.

This new multipolarity unveils new contestation. The increasing economic and geopolitical heft of new middle powers offset the West's geopolitical and ideological influence, putting it on a path of relative decline. UNGA voting on Russia's invasion clearly illustrate this shift. While the West remains the dominant geopolitical power, it no longer wields the coercive and attractive influence it once had. It now has to compete for influence with systemic rivals, which gives emerging and middle powers agency to balance between actors. With complex interdependence becoming weaponized, states can no longer act unilaterally, but have to foster interdependence and partnerships with like-minded countries in an increasingly contested world order. Zeitenwende may represent a new era of world politics, time will tell if that translates into Germany's and its partners' strategies.