A Wasted Opportunity: Why the European Response to Putin’s War Has Only Reinforced a Dangerous Status Quo
Essay by Junior Ambassador Jacob Levitan

Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine hoping to effect what German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called a global Zeitenwende, or watershed era. Beyond Ukraine, the Russian leader sought to dismantle a US-led, rules-based world order based on principles of democracy, free markets, the rule of law, and human rights. For Scholz, the war marked a turning point because Germany and the European Union would raise their defense spending and change their strategic cultures.

The war has not been a global Zeitenwende as either leader hoped, but a wasted opportunity for change. The war fits into a pattern of interconnected trends and crises — economic, political, health, climate, and military — that grow off each other and create more crises, or a "polycrisis," as English historian Adam Tooze described. Polycrises are not new and occur in the lead up to major world order changes like World War I or the Soviet collapse. But as information and transportation technologies have developed, polycrises have grown in intensity.

Putin began this latest polycrisis when he railed against US unipolarity in his 2007 Munich speech. Since then, Russia and China have challenged the US-led order, seeking to bring back multipolarity and great power rivalry (GPR). Both states have sought to subvert democracies, either through Russian disinformation campaigns or Chinese economic support of authoritarians. The Great Recession of 2008 has abetted the rise of the populism that led to Brexit and an isolationist United States under US President Donald Trump. Climate change and the pandemic have inflamed political tensions from the United States to China. In the authoritarian camp, regimes are facing mass protests from Belarus and Russia to Iran and China. These trends have fed off each other to create an atmosphere of permanent crisis and encouraged a path to great power war that could end the US-led order.

The Ukraine war could have been a global Zeitenwende if the EU became a pole in a new multipolar order by reforming itself into a military power with a proactive strategic culture and capacity for global force projection. But the EU refused to enact basic reforms for integrating the European defense markets, preserving Europe's reliance on the United States for basic logistical equipment and support. While the European militaries may grow, their strategic culture remains reactive and dependent on US leadership. The Finnish and Swedish accessions to NATO have proven that Europeans see the United States and NATO, not the EU or OSCE, as the real sources of European security. Outside Europe, pre-war trends of US-Indian alignment against China through multilateral organizations like the Quad (with Japan and Australia) and now the I2U2 (with Israel and the UAE) continues. Instead of ending the US-led order, the war has given it new life as Washington organizes a coalition of democracies against China.

Europe's failure to use the war to reform was a missed opportunity to break out of the polycrisis. The EU could have disrupted this trend by emerging as a great power alongside the United States and China. Instead, Europe chose a variation of the status quo ante, making Europe only a stronger US auxiliary. The EU as a great power would have changed the balance of power and world politics. Instead, trends of GPR between Washington and Beijing continue as the two rivals build their blocs. Despite Ukraine's tragedy, the global status quo remains.