Russia’s War Against Ukraine Is Not a Zeitenwende — But a Symptom of, and Catalyst for, an Era of Liberal Disillusion, Power Politics, and Fragmentation

Essay by Junior Ambassador Gesine Weber

“Events, my dear boy, events”, replied Harold Macmillian’s when asked what he feared most about being prime minister. Undoubtedly, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is an event that constitutes a turning point for European security, with a much more tangible threat. Nevertheless, it is not a “Zeitenwende” in itself, but the manifestation of the waning rules-based international order for almost a decade. Characteristics of this era are that liberal disillusion, both internationally and domestically, is its root cause, power politics its manifestation, and fragmentation and opportunistic alliances its future.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an unprecedented violation of the international order — which became possible because of declining US leadership over the last decade and Europeans unable and unwilling to fill this void. The US talked the talk of a liberal rules-based order, but did not walk the walk. This was most visible when the Obama administration did not respect the “red line” it had drawn in Syria by not retaliating the use of chemical weapons by Bashar Al-Assad. Similarly, the absence of US leadership for a clear NATO response when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and its de facto acceptance due to the absence of fierce European sanctions, sent the disastrous signal that power politics is a promising tool for pursuing global ambitions.

Likewise, Europe and the US have failed to gain support for the conceptualization of the liberal rules-based international order through making attractive offers to potential partners. The sheer endless process of EU enlargement and the EU-Turkey migration deal have caused massive deception and disillusion regarding the EU's liberal narrative both among governments and citizens. All this happened in a period when societies domestically witnessed that fighting for a liberal future — the Arab Spring or the Euromaidan protests as prime examples — did not pay off, but rather turn into fiercer repression. Simultaneously, populism in Europe and the election of Trump have undermined the credibility of foreign policy narratives stressing the importance of a liberal rules-based order. A rising and increasingly important China, and especially the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013, hence presented an attractive alternative, economically and politically. Likewise, coalitions like the Astana format proved effective and questioned the relevance of solutions taken in existing institutions.

Since its supporters did not succeed in making the liberal rules-based global order deliver, they have opened a window of opportunity for power politics — such as the invasion of Ukraine, which could only constitute a blueprint, and a catalyst, for further significant violations of the international rules-based order. This strategic instability thus prompts states to become “swing states” on a global level, and take decisions regarding alliances based on opportunism rather than shared values or ideology. As the AUKUS deal has showcased, this also applies to democratic and aligned states, and tends to increase fragmentation in the international system.

In this era of liberal disillusion, power politics and fragmentation, events are the tip of the iceberg; albeit only symptoms, their analysis is crucial to understand the trends we are facing, and anticipate better responses.