

# Ukraine, Realism, and the Synchronization of Political Time in the US and Germany

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*How quickly things change.* The horrifying reality of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has revealed the mentality of a leader who would rather destroy a country than see it become independent of his will. Russia has chosen bombs that terrorize as the instrument of punishment for daring to choose a fate other than the status of Russian vassal. Underlying the actions of the Russian state is the sobering edict: Ukraine will exist neither as nation nor state “ohne mich.” The solipsistic narcissism behind the Russian war of collective punishment has revealed that its true motives are not to keep NATO away from its borders but to Russify Ukraine, to incorporate it as satellite at best, but as “verbrannte Erde” if necessary. The reality of the Russian threat to its neighbors in NATO is clear. No-one knows the true limits of Putin’s ambitions in Europe and it would be reckless to assume that NATO’s capabilities are already sufficient to deter a potential attack on the Baltic states.

As recently as last fall, many scholars and pundits in the US plausibly argued that if Russia’s “legitimate security interests” were properly respected, a compromise could be reached over the geopolitical orientation of Ukraine in the 21st century. The outlines of such a potential compromise – Ukraine in the EU, but not in NATO, a so-called neutralization model, for which the case of Austria during the Cold War is one model, are still visible. We can still hope for a negotiated peace but the goal of peace is best served by greater military capacity to deter further attacks. Anxieties in the US and Germany that [strengthening NATO’s Enhanced Forward Defense posture](#) could undermine peace by dangerously escalating the conflict with Russia are wrongheaded. For these reasons, the “*Zeitenwende*” recognized by Chancellor Olaf Scholz on February 27, is justified, and should be applauded.

What are the implications of this dire challenge to the European international order for the German-American relationship, and how should we think about and help to shape this *Zeitenwende*? This invasion demands a synchronized response from the US and its allies. But it may afford some historical perspective to recall other moments in the history of the US-German relationship when the sense of urgency to face threats synchronized or failed to synchron.

From the 1880s to the outbreak of WWII, statesmen and intellectuals in the US and Germany engaged in a dialogue about the nature of geopolitics, of “power politics,” and of the nature of a “realistic” approach to the problems of war, peace and empire. As I have argued in my recent book, *The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought Between Germany and the United States*, what Western-educated elites call realism in foreign policy-making derives primarily from a US-German dialogue that dates back to their inter-imperial competition at the *fin de*

*siècle*. Between 1895 and 1900, German and US intellectuals grappled with what it meant to be a “world power,” and wrestled with each other to attain power that would place them in the first “rank.” While the competitive assessment of “great power” status was not new in the 1890s, a shift did occur from the pursuit of power through territorial expansion on the American and European continent respectively, to the pursuit of new markets and territories overseas. As Friedrich Ratzel, the geographer who influenced subsequent generations of geopolitical thought in both Germany and the US, wrote in 1897, Wilhelm II’s *Weltpolitik* disclosed the need for a “truer Realpolitik,” anchored by naval power and overseas colonies. While the debate in Germany—empire by land or by sea—continued down to WWI, the US defeat of Spain in 1898 prompted a similar public *Auseinandersetzung* with the meaning, opportunities, and costs of US advent to a “leading role” on the “world stage.” There was a temporal synchronicity in how the two countries’ strategic elites conceived of the world.

In the last twenty-five years, the boundaries of the US foreign policy debate has shifted towards imperial restraint. After twenty years of failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, fewer elites believe the US capable of spreading freedom and democracy as the neoconservatives of the Project for a New American Century had advocated en route to the Iraq War in the late 1990s. Nor is the confidence of the liberal internationalists the same as it was when in 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (whose death was announced recently) coined the phrase the “indispensable nation” to refer to the US at the height of its unipolar power. During the Trump Administration, liberal internationalists despaired of the “America First” rhetoric, and the dismissal of soft power and multilateralism in favor of nationalist swagger and economic transactionalism. They looked to President Biden to restore the rules-based liberal international order under American leadership.<sup>1</sup> Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order*, p. 8 Others argued for that Trump had [exposed weak points in liberal order and that saving it would require reimagining it](#).

Another *Zeitenwende* was proclaimed during the Trump presidency – the so-called “return of great-power competition.” Intellectuals writing at the speed of social media have a tendency to ontologize the present—think of the ritualistic use of the term “the Trump era” – a locution that dignified the raging dumpster fire of a patrimonial kleptocracy with temporal gravitas. We can face the challenge of the present without falling back on clichés about the return of “power politics” or “great power politics.” The revanchist grievances of China in Taiwan and Russia in Ukraine are rooted in particular histories and cannot therefore illustrate the eternal return of the same. The crises of liberal order are real but they do not vindicate a return to the traditions labelled “realist.” The crisis of liberal internationalism and liberal order also cannot vindicate classical realism’s emphasis on power politics – the locus classicus of which is the American corpus of the German emigré Hans Morgenthau – because realism is not liberalism’s “other” so much as its disavowed shadow side. The flip-side of liberal internationalism from Woodrow Wilson to Biden has been the pursuit of American hegemony, even if today it is a chastened primacy. Some of the most insightful critics of US foreign policy thinkers in the last twenty years—Andrew Bacevich and Patrick Porter, for example – consider themselves realists.

They argue that the only credible alternative path to an overweening American hegemony is a self-aware power politics. As [Porter put it in an important 2020 book](#), “If emancipation [in the name of a new humanist order] is impossible in this pessimistic tradition, if some hypocrisy and brutality is inevitable, if states and their rulers cannot be ‘good,’ they can at least be wiser and more self-aware.”(26)

Without a doubt, prudence, self-awareness, and imperial restraint are far better than its alternative – the pursuit of US primacy in either liberal internationalist or neoconservative garb. But hegemonic restraint does not require a realist ontology. The north Atlantic realism of empire, whose historical development from orthodoxy to crisis and restatement I trace, teaches skepticism about the imperial foundations of realism. Disentangling restraint, prudence and other sensible virtues from the metaphysics of realism resembles what Richard Rorty counseled in philosophy as a retreat from metaphysical foundations. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty argued that the philosophers who claimed to mirror nature in their reason would do better to give up their belief in the natural foundations for their politics, and just get on with their work. No version of classical realism or neo-realism gives us the normative grounds to critique Putin’s expansionism and brutality. A *Zeitenwende* that is correct for prudential reasons has no need of a grand realist theory to authorize it.

What the US and Germany face today with Russia is evidently not a peaceful competition of rivals that can be managed by the pursuit of equilibrium and balance, the leitmotifs of 19th century *Realpolitik*. Nor is the Russian invasion a result of Western failure to heed realist caution about the project of NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe. Biden deserves high marks for threading the needle thus far in sanctioning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, while resisting calls for a no-fly zone. Restraint is warranted here, but not because power politics or the problem of evil is hard-wired into the nature of international politics. Rather, restraint is warranted because a desperate Putin may use nuclear weapons. And the robust Western response to Russia includes a strong moral dimension, echoing the heroic agency of Ukrainians who speak in terms of self-determination that are generally dismissed by the realists’ focus on spheres of influence and allegedly objective measures of hard power.

Mobilizing the Euro-Atlantic alliance to support the Ukrainian people, nation, and state, through military aid, humanitarian relief, refugee assistance and beefing up NATO’s defenses is the correct course of action. American intellectuals on the Left, among which I count myself, are rightly cynical about bloated military budgets, long wars against amorphous or asymmetrical threats, and the kitschy aura of the rhetoric of defending the “Free World” from tyrants who are alleged to hate and fear Western freedoms and their unstoppable appeal. We on the Left need not forget everything we learned in the Cold War about the pathologies of US foreign policy and embrace a neoconservative vision of US primacy that exploits the blue and yellow flag. But nor can our anxieties about the revival of fundamentalist Cold War liberalism – and the backsliding that might entail with regard to the critique of American empire – justify avoiding our moral and political responsibility to counter the concrete and immediate threat Russia poses to Ukraine and the sovereignty of other Eastern European nations.

In the 1963 foreword to the first translation of *Politics among Nations* into German, Hans Morgenthau wrote, “While the US tended to underestimate [in the twenty years before he wrote it, i.e. in 1947] the significance of power, finding a replacement in vague legalistic and moralistic aspirations, Germany on the other hand shows the propensity to understand power in narrow ‘material’ terms and in practice rely on coercion, above all in its military form... So may this book serve as a corrective for German mistakes, as much as it has done for the American ones.” By the time his pupil Gottfried-Karl Kindermann attained the first German university chair in international politics, the moment for the synchronization of the “times” of American and West German realism had passed. Détente, Ostpolitik, Vietnam, and new perspectives from the peace research institutes founded in 1968, made the West German uptake of classical realism partial and halting. In 1973, Hans-Peter Schwarz wrote that realists like Morgenthau, Kennan and Aron had “scarcely influenced the political and theoretical discussion in the Federal Republic.” Schwarz surmised that “an essential role was played by the fact that the concepts of *Realpolitik* and *Machtpolitik* aroused... associations as unfavorable as the concepts of nation or Volk in other contexts.” Only with the waning of detente at the end of the 1970s did a new so-called “realism” about East-West politics emerge, advocated by figures like Helmut Kohl and Hans-Peter Schwarz. What was lost in the revival of realist fundamentalism was the fruits of the productive intellectual crisis of realism in the 1960s – a determination to reduce the threat of nuclear war, a commitment to North-South dialogue, and a constructivist disdain for simple measures of power and the national interest.

If the *Zeitenwende* is inspired in part by the moral demand to remember WWII, it would be a pity if in the course of remembering we also forgot hard-won lessons about the limits of classical realism that emerged from the intertwined histories of German and American empire.

## References

- Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order*, p. 8

