



**John Bolton**  
Ambassador

# What Zeitenwende What Wende What Zeitenwende

National security turns on two fundamental questions. Who threatens us, and what do we do about it? Today, the global West (a concept much broader than mere geographic location) is having serious trouble addressing both these basic dilemmas. We are not divided on everything, but we are divided on enough that our adversaries can hardly avoid seeing the divergencies and vigorously exploiting them at will.

**T**he United States is certainly split internally, as this year's presidential race shows. Donald Trump and his congressional supporters question US military support for Ukraine, and even espouse withdrawal from NATO, or fundamentally restructuring alliance commitments. Nonetheless, recent polling shows overwhelming majorities of Americans back NATO (73%–27%) and believe the US should defend NATO allies if they are attacked (74%–26%). However, that same poll also found comparable majorities believe NATO relies too much on US funding and that other NATO allies are not doing enough (74%–26%)<sup>1</sup>.

The poll further reflects that support for military aid to Ukraine remains controversial, but respondents nonetheless agreed (66%–34%) that NATO members had a responsibility to support Ukraine against Russia's aggression, and that Ukraine should be formally invited to join NATO (70%–30%). After Congress passed the recent aid bill, many Members experienced no backlash from their constituents<sup>2</sup>, meaning the issue wasn't as salient at home as it was for some in Washington. In short, perturbations over Ukraine aid likely have more to do with Trump than they do with underlying American public opinion, at least so far.

## Dealing with the greatest adversary

Unfortunately, however, far more troubling over the long-term than America's Trump-induced confusion and division is Europe's apparent inability to see who the greatest adversary is, and its continuing unwillingness to acquire the means necessary to deal with the threat in all its manifestations. The emerging China-Russia axis – what they gleefully call a “partnership without limits” – has two critical attributes. First, this new bloc has a powerful global economic component, something the Sino-Soviet alliance never had during the Cold War. Second, the Beijing-Moscow axis and its satellites have the military wherewithal, including both highly sophisticated weapons systems and enormous manpower, that its Cold War predecessor had only partially, and inadequately. And now, there will be two massive nuclear arsenals facing the West, not just one.

<sup>1</sup> [https://harvardharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/HHP\\_Apr2024\\_KeyResults.pdf](https://harvardharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/HHP_Apr2024_KeyResults.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/30/us/politics/republicans-ukraine-aid-vote.html>



*“Is the world, therefore, now in crisis? Ukrainians know the answer to that question, as do Israelis. Taiwan, the Philippines and others along China’s Indo-Pacific periphery already feel the pressure.”*



Is the world, therefore, now in crisis? Ukrainians know the answer to that question, as do Israelis. Taiwan, the Philippines and others along China’s Indo-Pacific periphery already feel the pressure. Take China’s economic threat, which includes:

- decade after decade of pirating intellectual property from the West, often focusing on highly sensitive national-security technology, with minimal retaliatory action by the victims;
- weaponizing firms like Huawei and ZTE, which are not “telecommunications companies,” but arms of the Chinese state, aiming to seize control of fifth-generation telecoms systems, the better to extract massive quantities of information to transmit directly to Beijing’s memory banks;
- deceptive, indeed corrupt, financial practices worldwide, including in Europe and across the West, often called “debt diplomacy,” that effectively entrap both private businesses and governments; and
- throughgoing abuse of the World Trade Organization under the guise of being merely a “developing” country.

The United States, reacting to this panoply of offensive economic warfare, has imposed increasingly stiff import and export controls to protect intellectual property and hardware critical to national-security;

increased scrutiny, through the Committee on Foreign Investment in the US and in Congress, of the implications of China’s activities in America, including purchases of significant amounts of land near military bases and other sensitive facilities; imposed retaliatory tariffs to respond to some of China’s worst economic manipulations, urging its fellow industrial democracies to increase their awareness and concern for China’s nefarious activities. More is coming whichever major-party candidate wins the Presidency in November.

## What about you, EU?

What is the European Union, and Germany in particular, doing? Amazingly, doubling down on its economic dependence on China. Rising concern about increased competition from China, especially in the transportation sector, is justifiably producing near-panic in certain EU circles. Unlike in Washington, however, the initial response is not to defend against Beijing’s economic warfare, but to plead for better treatment, including through more pilgrimages disguised as trade missions to the Middle Kingdom.

There is also, however, schizophrenia in EU policy, such as increasing tariffs on Chinese EV’s, although to date less than America<sup>3</sup>. Brussels may be trying to buy

time for threatened EU industries, or to increase Chinese investment in production in Europe<sup>4</sup>. If so, and if Chinese investment increases, it will mean the EU will be spared from having to make extensive capital expenditures in China so that its intellectual property can be stolen. Instead, Europeans can watch it being pirated without having to leave the comforts of home.

Europe’s confused response is reflected in politics as well. Just as Hungary’s once-liberal Viktor Orban gravitates toward Moscow, in Germany it is the Alternative für Deutschland (“AfD”) that gravitates toward Beijing. AfD leaders complain about the West’s “complete paranoia” about China<sup>5</sup>. Should Americans believe that AfD is wrong about the EU but right about China?

On defense issues, Europe, led by Germany, is also still confused, notwithstanding this summer’s nostalgic triumphalism at NATO’s 75th-anniversary celebrations in Washington. While more NATO members have reached the alliance’s 2%-of-GDP targets for defense spending, they cannot pause to congratulate themselves or catch their breath. Threatening circumstances globally and America’s abandonment of much of its defense industrial base in post-Cold War euphoria now require significant increases in US defense expenditures. Senator Roger Wicker, likely the Senate Armed Services Committee’s next Chairman if Republicans win control of the

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.wsj.com/business/autos/the-rise-of-chinese-evs-is-dividing-the-west-850b9e1d?mod=hp\\_lead\\_pos10](https://www.wsj.com/business/autos/the-rise-of-chinese-evs-is-dividing-the-west-850b9e1d?mod=hp_lead_pos10)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.wsj.com/economy/global/europes-response-to-china-shock-2-0-hold-china-closer-38656bd0?mod=hp\\_major\\_pos1#cxrecs\\_s](https://www.wsj.com/economy/global/europes-response-to-china-shock-2-0-hold-china-closer-38656bd0?mod=hp_major_pos1#cxrecs_s)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/712a4abd-66b3-4b83-bba1-012d5cc12f02>

Senate, recently made the case for such increases<sup>6</sup>. I believe spending should return to Reagan-era levels (5%–6% of GDP), which would imply corresponding increases for our allies worldwide to at least 3%–4%.

But, say Europeans, or at least Germans, what about der Zeitenwende: doesn't that prove we're serious about defense? The answer from most Americans will be: what Zietenwende?

## Zeitenwende spending

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has already commented on the November US election in ways guaranteed to draw Trump's ire, which will unquestionably produce bad news for NATO if he wins. Scholz said of Biden recently that "this is a man who knows exactly what he is doing." The Chancellor lauded Biden's substantive achievements, adding "I think it is very likely that the current president could win the election"<sup>7</sup>. One of Trump's minions immediately expressed his dissatisfaction with Scholz<sup>8</sup>.

What did the Chancellor hope to achieve by praising Biden when he should see clearly that Trump will focus intently on Germany's levels of defense spending going forward. Berlin may temporarily meet NATO's 2% target, because of Zeitenwende spending. But when that one-time surge disappears, the recurrent problem of underspending will immediately resume, initially, by some estimates, as much as 25 billion euros annually<sup>9</sup>. Scholz might as well have put a target on his back, and NATO's. Of course, Scholz's criticism of France's once-and-likely-future presidential candidate Marine Le Pen<sup>10</sup> isn't going to do him any favors with Trump either.

We can collectively do much better than this, but our grace period is not infinite. Let's not waste it. ■

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2024/5/senator-wicker-unveils-major-defense-investment-plan>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/06/15/biden-scholz-g7-00163585>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/06/16/trump-ally-colby-blasts-german-chancellor-00163607>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ifo.de/en/press-release/2022-04-19/german-armed-forces-need-additional-eur-25-billion-each-year>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/Oaadcd8a-bbeb-4003-8ed1-a4750a9a1604>

*“But, say Europeans, or at least Germans, what about der Zeitenwende: doesn't that prove we're serious about defense? The answer from most Americans will be: what Zietenwende?”*

