Rehabilitating the "Neocons" is no Zeitenwende

Prominent Republican Critics of Trump Made his Rise Possible

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The old adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" is prevailing in 2025 Berlin foreign policy circles, where an antagonistic history with leading Republicans is making way for a shared disdain of the Trump administration. The US architects of the 2003 Iraq War and "war on terror" under President George W. Bush were once synonymous with the breakdown of the Transatlantic Alliance and post-War international order. No longer, with Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Ambassador John Bolton and Professor Philip Zelikow all making recent public appearances to offer advice on renewing US global leadership. Yet Trump's escalating abandonment of international political and legal norms did not emerge out of nowhere, but rather from years of systematic disparagement of norms by these same former officials. Their aspiration for intellectual authority in constructing a new international order demands an equal account of their complicity in deconstructing the order that went before it.

The fundamental qualification of these policymakers is claimed expertise in understanding US power and how it can serve the national security of America and its allies. Rice and Zelikow met with thought leaders at the American Academy in Berlin this September, culminating in a public event: "What Comes Next? Imagining a New Economic and Security Commons". In June, Bolton received praise at the German Council on Foreign Relations, where he spoke on the "Trump Presidency and the Future of US Foreign Policy". Willingness to reconsider their ideas could demonstrate the *Zeitenwende* – the 2022 "historic turning point" in German security policy that extends also to hearing new perspectives. Yet, their collective record is one of catastrophic miscalculations about the nature of US power, including especially how to sustain its legitimacy in the eyes of domestic and global actors alike. Unapologetic worldviews thus offer the opposite of a *Zeitenwende* – reassurance that old ideas will be rehabilitated once the "aberration" of the current moment has passed. Trumpism will not end with Trump, with Berlin needing genuinely new thinking to reconstruct global political leadership in a changing international order.

The "Neocons" and International Law

The eclectic group of policymakers promoting the amorphous "war on terror" have been popularly labelled as "neocons" – a term with such subjective interpretations that it often obscures more than illuminates. Rice has described Bolton as a leading "neocon hire" in the Bush administration, to distinguish his views from her own, while Bolton strenuously rejects the label. Historical meanings aside, the term does hold resonance in public discourse, to denote US policymakers for whom a faith in the power of military superiority merged with a belief in regime change as a security strategy – especially as democracy promotion. The policy approaches of both Rice and Bolton have been repeatedly branded as "neoconservative" in these terms.

These "neocons" share a corresponding scepticism of international law – as an obstacle to material and moral interests. Bolton is perhaps the most vocal American critic, across scholarship and practice, declaring: "International law is not law; it is a series of political and moral arrangements that stand or fall on their own merits, and anything else is simply theology and superstition masquerading as law". Rice's statements across her career are more temperate, but in practice she has consistently promoted legal interpretations that would remove all effective constraints on US power. In nomination hearings for Secretary of

State, Rice defended US refusal to recognise legal protections under the Geneva Conventions, due to "tensions between trying to live with the laws and the norms that we have become accustomed to and the new kind of war that we are in". The Trump administration inherits this scepticism towards the laws of war, recently declaring a policy of "maximum lethality, not tepid legality" and the end of "stupid rules of engagement. We untie the hands of our warfighters to intimidate, demoralize, hunt and kill the enemies of our country".

The permissive approach is exemplified by the infamous "Bush Doctrine", or right to wage preventive war, which was enshrined in the 2002 US National Security Strategy drafted by Zelikow. Zelikow then defended a "view of international law that emphasizes democratic accountability", by which he meant a US prerogative to discredit any legal obligation deemed insufficiently controlled by like-minded democracies. This was the context for novel US legal arguments justifying the Iraq War, where it claimed the right to infer authority from United Nations Security Council resolutions even against that institution's express opposition. The current author interviewed then Legal Adviser to the Department of State William Taft IV on this point, who acknowledged that the interpretation he once championed thus "certainly did have a weakening effect" on the UNSC.

The image of the American hegemon launching an illegal pre-emptive war on Iraq arguably set precedents more damaging to the UN system and international law than any other single event in the post-Cold War era. The war is credibly described as "the biggest foreign-policy disaster in US history since the Vietnam War", for weakening stability and security in the region for a generation, as well as the US itself by almost any measure. For Germany, the disdain for constraints of international political and legal order of the "neocons" has a legacy that continues to undermine its national security interests to the present day.

German Approaches towards International Order

From its first articulation in the shadow of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the German *Zeitenwende* has been inextricably intertwined with the defence of international law. This was reiterated as a cornerstone of the 2023 National Security Strategy, with its opening commitment to an international order that, amongst other things, "respects and upholds international law, the Charter of the United Nations, the sovereign equality of states, the prohibition on the threat or use of force". This is no naïve fiction, but rather a reference point from which Germany seeks to develop the military capability and leadership role necessary to make international legal order work.

Credibility emerges from Germany's principled and strategically prudent position in 2003, when officials informed Rice that they would not support an Iraqi invasion contrary to UN authorisation and international law more generally. Indeed, whereas in 2002 Friedrich Merz was among those in the CDU/CSU opposition refusing to rule out German involvement, then Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was re-elected to office in good part due to steadfast opposition to war. The ensuing rupture brought "German-American relations to their lowest ebb since the end of the Second World War", which had assumed "shared close ties and traditions of liberty, a strong civil society and a free market economy". History vindicates the decision to uphold international law and reject war which, as repeatedly warned in the months prior, proved counterproductive to the fight against global terrorism, destroyed regional stability and the balance of power, and resulted in deaths counted in the hundreds-of-thousands and costs counted in the trillions.

What US foreign policy elites did not fully appreciate at the time, however, was how faith in unrestrained military force would come to undermine their own domestic political support for American global leadership. Leaders convinced a majority of Americans that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were necessary, but with similar majorities now agreeing both wars, respectively, were a mistake. Trump successfully campaigned on that disillusionment by claiming that he always opposed the Iraq War (a claim repeatedly discredited) – as a potent example of his "America first" foreign policy. The lesson drawn from the disastrous war was not to return to prior legal and political

norms, but rather a sense of nihilism towards any project that bound America to a global common good. Years of rhetoric and policies undermining public confidence in the virtue of international rules, combined with the evident failings of those claiming "expertise", now yield a "struggle over the meaning of modernity, playing out on a global stage".

Rice and Zelikow: Creating a "Global Commonwealth"

In 2019, Rice and Zelikow authored "To Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth". Their "global commonwealth" terminology is novel, but captures what is more commonly named the US led "liberal" or "rules-based" international order (although the authors reject such terms). The book studiously avoids serious reflection on the authors' own choices that have made such an order less attainable, opting instead to deflect: "Hindsight is not 20/20. It is blinding. The path of what happened is so brightly lit that the alternatives are cast more deeply into shadow". Yet it is precisely the responsibility of persons who aspire to explain the world to shine a light into its darkest moments. A *New York Times* review pondered: "What, one is forced to ask, should be made of a work that is so scrupulous in historical analysis yet so impoverished in critical self-reflection?"

The results of these failings were on display in Berlin, where Rice lamented America's "sense of weariness" in maintaining the global order. The present author asked both speakers to consider their "own contributions to the breakdown of the current global order" through instigating drawn out and needless wars. Rice refused to be drawn on connections with her worldview that removed legitimate constraints on US military horizons, while repeating the virtues of Iraqi regime change. More broadly, she asserted that "sometimes these things take time and maybe one of the things that we understand as people who have studied history and people who have been involved in history is not to make judgments too quickly". Glossing over more than two decades of bloodshed, real insecurity and wasted political capital, to assert a hypothetical future payoff, should alone be disqualifying as a credible geopolitical commentator.

Bolton: Trump as "Aberration"

Disagreement between Rice and Bolton runs deep, with Bolton publicly criticizing Rice's moderating influence during the second term of the Bush administration. Nevertheless, Rice supported Bolton's nomination as UN Ambassador in 2005, on the basis that "his skepticism about the organization was an asset with conservatives and, from my point of view, a corrective to the excessive multilateralism of our diplomats in New York". The two were on the same page in Berlin in their silence on how past confidence in unilateral American power contributed to current challenges.

Bolton's bottom-line was that Trump "is an aberration in American politics" and thus "does not reflect a *Zeitenwende* in American foreign policy". On that basis, his advice was precisely not to change underlying German assessments of the US, but rather to assume that worldviews more in line with Bolton's own would revive when Trump left office in January 2029. The present author again asked Bolton to reflect on how positions he has long promulgated helped pave the way for Trump's election – including foremost his advocacy for wars in Iraq, Iran and beyond. As with Rice, Bolton reiterated his belief that the 2003 invasion was "the right thing to do", while pleading ignorance in seeing "how my support for the war in Iraq leads to Donald Trump".

Starting Points for New Strategic Thinking

In the struggle to find responses to the Trump administration, it is tempting to heed any powerful voice that opposes his transactional global vision – especially Republicans claiming to represent a viable political alternative. There is no doubt that these former officials have faced policy dilemmas more consequential than most people will encounter in their lifetimes. Yet, contemporaries that have undertaken the painful task of self-reflection emerge as more credible interlocutors – notably in the essay by historian Max Boot: "What the Neocons Got Wrong And How the Iraq War Taught Me About the Limits of American Power". The

starting point for new strategic thinking is not with those who deny the fiasco of attempting to construct a world order in the new millennium that dispensed with meaningful constraints of political and legal norms.

Such a worldview is diametrically opposed to the stated commitments of German foreign policy, which centre on preserving both the international legal order and respect for sovereign equality, and in understanding the conditions most likely to ensure sustainability in some version of the US military umbrella. The "old guard" of Republican elites have not comprehended the reasons for the domestic political shift away from them, leaving them as unconvincing arbiters of US global power and thus as a diversion from reimagining the German and European security order.

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