

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Conference Report on “The Failure of the Post-Cold War Global Order?”

31 May–3 June 2023, in Mainz

Organizers:

- Andreas Rödder, chair for Modern and Contemporary History at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and Helmut Schmidt Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, SAIS, Johns Hopkins University Washington, D.C.
- Francis J. Gavin, Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor and inaugural director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins SAIS.

Report by **Bastian Knautz** and **Lukas Paul Schmelter**, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Department for Modern and Contemporary History

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was an event of epochal significance, which German chancellor Olaf Scholz declared to be a “*Zeitenwende*” [watershed era]. Russian president Vladimir Putin’s war permanently changed the map of international politics. It marked the end of the world order as of 1990, the third post-war international order of the twentieth-century in the northern hemisphere that began after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the lifespan of the post-Cold War order was halfway between that of the Paris Peace Conference order of 1919/20 and that of the Cold War; the war in Ukraine puts it in a historical perspective. Has the post-Cold War order in fact failed? And if so, what were the main reasons for its failure and could it have been avoided? Which historical alternatives existed? And what can we learn from this history for present and future international politics?

These central questions of contemporary and future international policymaking were the focus of a discussion involving 29 experts in history and political science from 11 countries at a conference in Mainz, Germany, from May 31 to June 3. The conference was organized by Andreas Rödder (JGU Mainz and SAIS Johns Hopkins University Washington, D.C.) and Francis J. Gavin (SAIS Johns Hopkins University Washington,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kagan has argued that this world order was revised no later than 2008. See Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008).

D.C.), and was funded by the Gutenberg International Conference Center, the German Academic Exchange Service, the German Federal Foreign Office, and the German Research Foundation.

In his introductory statement, Andreas Rödder pointed to the central question of whether we are really witnessing the turn of an era, a collapse of the post-1990 international order, or whether recent events are simply part of gradual changes in the international system. In order for the conference participants to adequately address this question, he emphasized the importance of “thinking historically,” and thus examining the longer historical lines and contingencies as a condition for identifying viable policy alternatives and missed opportunities.<sup>2</sup> To this end, Rödder elaborated on the historical roots of the 1990 world order and compared it to the orders of 1919/20 and 1945. He argued that the order of 1990 was established neither by a large congress, as in Paris in 1919/20, nor by a freezing of the status quo as after 1945, but by a treaty with Germany, by the perpetuation and expansion of Western institutions, and without any real institutional structuring. As a result, power was concentrated on the part of the West, making this a “hegemonic order.”<sup>3</sup> According to Rödder, the optimism of entering a new era marked a large difference between the post 1990 order and those that preceded it: Not only did Francis Fukuyama expect the “end of history,”<sup>4</sup> but almost every Western statesman anticipated the emergence of a new world order that was based solely on democracy, freedom, capitalism, and the rule of law.

At the same time, Rödder—strongly supported by Francis J. Gavin<sup>5</sup>—warned against the historian’s hubris in mocking the eschatological Western optimism of 1990 with the benefit of hindsight and stressed the importance of taking into account the difficulties of politicians in making decisions in the face of complexity and radical uncertainty about the future. Nevertheless, for Rödder, the historical perspective with its ability to include the concept of contingency helps to identify and address the underlying crucial questions: was there a unipolar moment that the West squandered? Had there been missed opportunities to reconcile Russia’s great-power ambitions and the security interests with the transforming states in East Central Europe? Could China rise and avoid Thucydides’ trap?<sup>6</sup> And did/does Europe have a chance to become a global player? Rödder’s comments both set the tone for the conference and outlined the central themes of the five substantive panels.

### Panel One

What role did Western hubris play in the design flaws of the post-Cold War order, and were there alternatives to founding the order on Western Cold War institutions? The first panel, which was pre-structured by four

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<sup>2</sup> For Rödder’s arguments see also his most recent book: Andreas Rödder, *21.1: Eine kurze Geschichte der Gegenwart (21.1: A Short History of the Present)* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2023): 342–382, 392–393.

<sup>3</sup> Kyle M. Lascurettes and Michael Poznansky, “International Order in Theory and Practice,” *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.673>.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, Macmillan, 1992); Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16:2 (1989): 3–18.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed view of Gavin’s argument see Francis J. Gavin, “Thinking Historically: A Guide for Policy,” in Andreas Wegner, Ursula Jasper, and Myriam Dunn, eds., *The Politics and Science of Prevision: Governing and Probing the Future* (London: Routledge, 2020): 73–88.

<sup>6</sup> See Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydide’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); see also Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, *After Engagement: Dilemmas in the U.S.-China Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

opening statements, focused on these questions.<sup>7</sup> In the first statement, Dominik Geppert (Potsdam)<sup>8</sup> argued that hubris hardly played a role in the concrete situation of 1990 and was not the primary cause of the flaws in the design of the post-Cold War order; short-term memories of the dangers of the Cold War and long-term memories of the devastation of World War II were still far too present among the statesmen involved. According to Geppert, policymakers were guided by pure optimism rather than hubris. Many of them perceived the end of the Cold War as a turning point and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) Paris Summit in November 1990 as an opportunity to create a common pan-European future. Geppert therefore took the historical analysis of the CSCE Paris Summit as a starting point to explore the question of alternatives to the post-Cold War order, comparing it with the influential Congress of Vienna in 1814/15. He found similarities and correlations. For example, neither one was intended to define a new international order in all its details once and for all. He highlighted two crucial differences: the first is the response to the German question. While the Congress of Vienna resolved the German question by establishing the German Confederation in a way that was acceptable to all the powers involved, the CSCE was insignificant in resolving the German question because the important decisions had been taken elsewhere (in the Two Plus Four Agreement of September 1990 where the Four Powers which had occupied Germany after 1945 renounced all their rights with regard to Germany, allowing for its reunification as a fully sovereign state the following year).

The second difference involves the right to national self-determination and the equality of large and small nations, which did not exist in 1815 and which dominated thinking in 1990. Geppert therefore doubts that the CSCE framework could have been a more effective order alternative than an order based on the Western institutions. Unlike NATO and the European Community (EC), the CSCE framework depended heavily on the bipolar order of the East-West conflict. In this respect, Geppert added, NATO and the EC were far superior to the CSCE in terms of their influence on the building of the post-Cold War order.

Piers Ludlow (London),<sup>9</sup> on the other hand, emphasized that the institutional setting of the exclusively Western-dominated order, which is an important part of past and present problems, was very much the consequence of the enormous intellectual hubris of Western decisionmakers in the 1990s and early 2000s. The strong belief in the “end of history” thesis and the superiority of the Western hegemonic order as the only alternative for a power structure of the post-Cold War order, he added, prevented Western leaders from anticipating today’s problems and looking for viable alternatives; and the one-sided winner-take-all peace led to a lasting sense of devastation for Russia. Ludlow argued that for Europe, however, there was no real alternative to the concept of “more Europe,” the deepening of the integration process and the opening of the European Union to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which for Europe was the overriding answer to the enormous challenge of transformation. Like Geppert, he emphasized that the existing

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<sup>7</sup> For a further discussion, see for example: John J. Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” in: *International Security* 43:4 (2019): 7–50, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00342](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342); Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *Pax Transatlantica: America and Europe in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Timothy Garton Ash, *Homelands: A Personal History of Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023): 236–241; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2016): 172–233, 274–335.

<sup>8</sup> See also Geppert’s recent essays: Dominik Geppert, “1815 und die europäische Staatenwelt (1815 and the European World of States),” in Thomas Becker et al., eds., *Das Rheinland auf dem Weg nach Preußen (The Rhineland on the Way to Prussia)* (Cologne: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019): 23–37; Dominik Geppert, “Die internationale Ordnung seit 1989/90 (The International Order since 1989/90),” in: Peter Geiss and Peter Arnold Heuser, eds., *Friedensordnungen in geschichtsdidaktischer Perspektive (Peace Orders in a Historical Didactic Perspective)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017): 227–241.

<sup>9</sup> For Ludlow’s arguments, see also: N. Piers Ludlow, “The EU Response to the Ukraine War,” in James Ellison et al., “The War in Ukraine,” *Cold War History* 23:1 (2023): 121–206, here 166–173, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2023.2162329>; Ludlow, “Not a Wholly New Europe: How the Integration Framework Shaped the End of the Cold War in Europe,” in Frédéric Bozo, Andreas Rödder, and Mary Elise Sarotte, eds., *German Reunification: A Multinational History* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017): 133–152.

structures in Europe, with the dynamically growing and developing EU and NATO, were too dominant and the path dependencies too strong not to have been followed. But unlike other elements of the post-1990 order, Ludlow argued, the deepening and the eastward enlargement of the EU have been a great success story in supporting the transformation and stabilization of Central and Eastern European states.

Kristina Spohr (London)<sup>10</sup> explained that as Eastern Europe underwent “revolutionary” change and the world exited the Cold War, the world had witnessed “evolutionary,” managed processes of change that were marked by intense diplomacy at the highest levels. All sides had hoped to cooperatively build a better world. But, she stated, there was an asymmetry: the rupture was most felt in the “East.” There was no question which societal, political, and economic model had proven more attractive once people had the right to choose their own futures. Spohr stressed that in a climate of uncertainty and “temporal claustrophobia,” decision-makers were predisposed to opt for solutions that were built on the pillars of the older (Western) institutions that had proven their worth, rather than looking for novel, untested institutional alternatives to structure post-Iron Curtain Europe. Notably, once the pan-European CSCE revealed its impotence as Yugoslavia exploded in the 1990s, rapidly lost appeal. And with post-Soviet Russia a highly volatile, traumatized partner, Central and Eastern Europeans, the former Soviet periphery, but also the neutrals, including Finland, looked decidedly westward. Spohr underlined the fact that it was the caution, not the hubris, of the Europeans, as well as the magnetism of the institutional West, with its open (European) market, democracy, the rule of law, and security, that led to the perpetuation of EC/EU and NATO.

Vladislav Zubok (London)<sup>11</sup> strongly supported the argument that Western institutions were simply too attractive for the transforming countries with a free choice to have followed a different path. But even more than the previous three speakers, he emphasized the importance of the problem of missed opportunities and roads not taken. Based on his archival findings, he explained that there were alternative paths and a concrete window of opportunity to solve the “Russian problem,” not by force and containment, but by engagement and the creation of sustainable structures of cooperation between the West and Russia in the years 1991–1996. According to Zubok, the US and the EU could have made Russia “an offer it could not refuse” by initiating greater economic assistance to stabilize the post-Soviet economies or, more importantly, by pursuing the promising Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which aimed to build trust and relationships between NATO and the post-Soviet states through cooperation in several fields of military policy, instead of ad hoc NATO enlargement as the only option, which left Russia as a loose cannon in the European security architecture. This could have built on a remarkable pro-Western movement that emerged in the center of the Soviet empire and in elite political circles between 1990 and 1992 to break the path dependencies of the frontal confrontation, Zubok added. If the George H.W. Bush administration had remained in power, PfP might have become a more realistic option, he noted, but with the inexperienced and more inward-looking Clinton administration, the PfP option was more or less dead and the window of opportunity closed.

In the ensuing plenary discussion, which was moderated by Glenda Sluga (Florence),<sup>12</sup> there was general agreement that it was a fatal mistake and a failure of imagination on the part of Western decisionmakers, which stemmed mainly from a sense of hubris or superiority, to largely neglect the perspectives of the transforming countries and the varieties of capitalism and democracy, and to perceive the Western-dominated

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<sup>10</sup> See also Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: How Bush, Gorbachev, Kohl, and Deng Shaped the World after 1989* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Spohr, “NATO Enlargement and Putin’s War in Ukraine: Policy and History Between Myth and Reality, 1989–2022,” in Ellison et al., “The War in Ukraine,” 180–193, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2023.2162329>; Spohr and Daniel S. Hamilton, eds., *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> See also Zubok’s most recent book: Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); see also Zubok, “The Roots of Invasion,” as part of James Ellison et al., “The War in Ukraine,” *Cold War History* 23:1 (2023): 121–206, here 193–206, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2023.2162329>.

<sup>12</sup> See also Sluga’s book on the international order of 1814/15: Glenda Sluga, *The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe After Napoleon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

order as the only “universal” order. As Kori Schake (Washington, D.C.) pointed out, “winning the Cold War” was far more important to the West than Eastern countries winning their freedom. Despite agreement on this analysis, the consensus of the panelists was that there were very few real economic and political alternatives. Representing the majority view of the speakers, Marina Henke (Berlin) summed up the discussion on possible roads not taken by assessing the importance and likelihood of alternative orders as low and reiterating the outsized attractiveness of the “Western” option and the large presence of the Russian threat to the countries that were in the process of transformation.

### Panel Two

The second panel turned its attention to a question that had already featured prominently in the discussions following the first panel, namely the extent to which Russian humiliation—whether perceived or actual—was an important factor in the demise of the post-Cold War order.<sup>13</sup> The chair of the panel, Mattias Hessérus (Stockholm),<sup>14</sup> pointed out that humiliation is an often underestimated force in international politics. It is an immensely powerful emotion, he explained, and had the potential to be unleashed long after the alleged slight had been inflicted.

Jan Behrends (Frankfurt on Oder)<sup>15</sup> proceeded to deliver the first of four introductory statements. Behrends emphatically rejected the notion that humiliation was a valid framework with which to understand Russian behavior post-1989/90. Accepting that Russia had been humiliated, so Behrends argued, implied that Russia had been a victim. This, so Behrends put it simply, is a proposition that cannot be upheld when one objectively considers the developments in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, he argued, it is important to emphasize Russian agency. Russia has, after all, effectively been at war since its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In light of Russia’s long track record of military aggression beyond its recognized borders, Behrends pointed out that containment should consequently have begun much sooner than it did. In his assessment, the past several decades have witnessed a protracted imperial collapse, which, if uncontained, will wreak havoc on the surrounding regions, not to mention Russia itself. Crucially, Behrends highlighted that an earlier strategy of containment, buttressed by resolute deterrence on the part of the United States and its European allies, could have lent Russia the kind of status recognition it so desperately craved. One should not, after all, underestimate the sense of self-esteem that can stem from a power being regarded as a formidable adversary by those powers that it recognizes as great.

Wanda Jarzabek (Warsaw)<sup>16</sup> approached the issue in a similar vein by underscoring the importance of agency. The importance of agency, she explained, is shown in a comparison between the paths taken by Russia and its

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<sup>13</sup> Specifically on the emotive power of humiliation as a driving factor in Russian foreign policy see: Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Russia Says No: Power, Status, and Emotions in Foreign Policy”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47:3/4 (2014): 269–279, DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev\\_CHCO.2014.v36.46692](http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_CHCO.2014.v36.46692); the degree to which post-imperial trauma shaped post-Soviet Russia, see the following monographs: Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, 6th ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022); Zubok, *Collapse*.

<sup>14</sup> See also the anthologies co-edited by Mattias Hessérus: *Liberty: The Evolution of an Idea* (with Kurt Almquist and Alastair Benn) (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Stolpe, 2024) and *Past and Present: To Learn From History* (with Kurt Almquist) (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Stolpe, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> See also: Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur, [dekoder.org](http://dekoder.org), and Jan C. Behrends, *Postsojjetische Lebenswelten. Gesellschaft und Alltag nach dem Kommunismus (The Post-Soviet Experience. Society and Everyday Life after Communism). Companion Volume to the Eponymous Exhibition* (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2021); Jan C. Behrends, “The Aggression Against Ukraine. Comments from a Historian’s Perspective,” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 36 (2014): 325–329, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.5209/rev\\_CHCO.2014.v36.46692](https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_CHCO.2014.v36.46692).

<sup>16</sup> On the role of Central European states, particularly Poland, in the shaping of the post-Cold War order, see: Wanda Jarzabek, “Nationalstaat oder supranationale Strukturen? Die Positionen der mittelosteuropäischen Staaten nach

Central and East European neighbors. For better or worse, in the post-Cold War order the countries of Central and Eastern Europe found themselves in a new political situation that granted them more opportunities to make their own choices. They regained the right to build relations with other partners and in a different framework than was allowed by the Kremlin, and became members of NATO and the EU. They cooperated with each other, and, in doing so, avoided the “balkanization” of the region that was so widely feared. Russia and the Russians too, Jarzabek emphasized, were also able to choose their future path within the new European order, as well as the new post-Cold War global order after 1989. Even more importantly, unlike the Central and East European states, Russia was large and important enough to actively participate in shaping that order. A number of opportunities for cooperation in Europe, including Russia, were created. Russia was admitted to the Council of Europe. Many occasions for people-to-people, scientific, cultural, and economic contact appeared.

The potential and real benefits were not one-sided, Jarzabek underscored. Russia received economic assistance when its economy collapsed, remained in the UN Security Council, was able to collaborate with the West in the PFP, was part of the dedicated NATO-Russia Council that was built, and had its special status recognized through the expansion of the G7. Russia profited from the opening of Western markets to its goods, and it seized the opportunity to invest in the West. The notion, therefore, that Russia was not offered with an alternative path simply does not match with the facts, Jarzabek concluded. Instead, it was an active decision on the part of Russian leaders not to capitalize on the opportunities that were available.

Michael Kofman (Washington, D.C.)<sup>17</sup> focused his remarks on the question of incentives. Why did Russian leaders not imbed their country in the Western order? Was it even the West’s job to do so? For Kofman, Europe in the 1990s witnessed two concurrent geopolitical phenomena: the emergence of a power vacuum on the continent due to the Soviet withdrawal and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. According to Kofman, the focus, both then and now, has been more concentrated on the former development at the expense of the latter, whose implications, he went on to explain, were far-reaching. After all, one could argue that the present war in Ukraine, much like the conflicts in Georgia in 2008 and in Chechnya in the 1990s, is part of a larger, long running “war of Soviet succession.” With respect to the question of whether the order that emerged post-1990 was an inevitability, Kofman pointed out that it could not have been inevitable for the simple reason that immense efforts were evidently undertaken to build it.

In undertaking these efforts, the West was not acting in a predatory way by imposing this order on Russia by force. The West simply never extended an offer for inclusion on Russian terms. For Kofman, there were several reasons why this was not done. First, one must consider the time constraints that were imposed on Western policymakers due to the rapidity of developments in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The window of opportunity, in which an inclusion of Russia might have been possible, was in fact very small. Second, the geopolitical necessity of adopting a more conciliatory approach to Russia that might have accommodated more of Russia’s demands was simply not given. China had not yet emerged as a serious geopolitical challenger to the United States. Had that been the case, Kofman argued, an accommodation of

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dem Umbruch (Nation State or Supranational Structures? The Positions of the Central Eastern European States After the Upheaval),” in Tim Geiger, Jürgen Lillteicher, and Hermann Wentker, eds., *Zwei plus Vier: Die internationale Gründungsgeschichte der Berliner Republik (Two Plus Four: The International Founding History of the Berlin Republic)* (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021): 161–81; Jarzabek, “Shadows of Memory in Polish-German Relations (1989–2005),” in Kristin Kopp and Joanna Nizyńska, eds., *Germany, Poland, and Postmemorial Relations: In Search of a Livable Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012): 25–42.

<sup>17</sup> See also Michael Kofman, “La Russia e l’Occidente: la tragedia politica del dopo-guerra fredda (Russia and the West: The Political Tragedy of the Post-Cold War),” in Giancarlo Aragona, ed., *La Russia post-sovietica. Dalla caduta del comunismo a Putin: storia della grande transizione (Post-Soviet Russia. From the Fall of Communism to Putin: History of the Great Transition)* (Milan: Mondadori, 2018): 115–131.

Russia may very well have served US strategic ends. Ultimately, there was a lack of this kind of geopolitical necessity and thus potential alternatives were left unexplored.

Sergey Radchenko (Washington, D.C.)<sup>18</sup> began his remarks by building on Jan Behrends's point regarding the possibility of states gaining self-esteem by assuming the role of a foe. Recognition as an adversary, Radchenko stated, can be a powerful source of legitimation. Turning to the issue of humiliation, he outlined that it was not so much the humiliation itself that was the problem. Rather it was Russia's actions in pursuit of the aim of overcoming the perceived humiliation that was the issue. In doing so, Russia has repeatedly moved to humiliate others. In exploring how this sense of humiliation came about, Radchenko emphasized the importance of resisting the urge to render the past to fit the current moment. Indeed, even without NATO expansion Russia may very well have driven westward. However, this was not the only possible outcome. In understanding the 1990s, Radchenko highlighted the importance of multicausality, which precludes the adoption of the kind of simple narratives that are particularly popular at present. Radchenko notes that the scholarship on the 1990s will likely develop in a fashion similar to how our thinking about the origins of the Cold War developed. Currently, he went on to explain, we are in a traditionalist phase, which emphasizes path-dependency, tends towards monocausal explanations, and conveniently abdicates responsibility for what happened.

In the discussion that followed the four statements, Brendan Simms (Cambridge) expanded on Radchenko's remark about Russia seeking to overcome its humiliation by humiliating others. Simms reflected upon the fact that Russia seeks equality on the global stage and understands this to be guaranteed by a firm inequality between itself and its near abroad. Therein, so Simms concluded, lays a tension that cannot really be resolved if the West remains committed to its conception of order, which was premised on the equality of sovereign states. Spohr seconded Simms's point by remarking that the fundamental issue was and continues to be Russia's thinking in terms of spheres of influence. To this, Xiang Lanxin (Geneva/Shanghai) rebutted that it was dishonest of the West to deny that it too thought in terms of spheres of influence and engaged in great power politics. The very concept of great-power politics, Xiang outlined, is inherent to the Westphalian state system, which was of course a Western creation in the first place. With respect to the question of whether the West thinks in terms of spheres of influence, Kofman remarked that while it is undeniable that NATO expansion was an extension of Western influence, it was also extended into what was effectively "available real estate." Rana Mitter (Oxford) turned the focus to Central Asia and reflected upon the fact the region currently looks remarkably similar to post-1990 Central and Eastern Europe, with the shape of the region subject to larger geopolitical forces and competing interests. Zubok closed the discussion by proposing that a major issue that had yet to be addressed is the fact that the recognition of the Russian Federation as the successor state to the Soviet Union may have created a problematic path dependency.

### Panel Three

The third panel explored the European Union and its (lack of) geopolitical power as part of today's problems.<sup>19</sup> The discussion focused on the question of why the EU was and is not a real and autonomous strategic power and whether or how it could become a global player in the future. Marina Henke<sup>20</sup> opened the

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<sup>18</sup> See Radchenko's forthcoming monograph on Soviet post-war foreign policy: Sergey Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> For a further discussion, see for example the special issue of *Politique étrangère* 88:3 (2023): "European Union: A Geopolitical Illusion?"; Antonina Bakardjieva Engelbrekt et al., eds., *The European Union in a Changing World Order: Interdisciplinary European Studies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Luiza Bialasiewicz, ed., *Europe in the World: EU Geopolitics and the Making of European Space* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> See also Henke's most recent book: Marina E. Henke, *Constructing Allied Cooperation: Diplomacy, Payments, and Power in Multilateral Military Coalitions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

discussion with her statement, showing that there were attempts by the EU to become a serious actor on the global stage, some of them even ambitious, and not all of them unsuccessful. She cited the establishment of sustainable institutional structures such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), or the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as the numerous sanctions programs and the provision of more than 9 billion euros in military aid to Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022. But apart from that, she noted, there is still much more disenchantment than enchantment with the EU as a global player.

To explain this development, Henke pointed to two key moments and failed dynamics in the recent history of EU security institution-building. The first is the 1998 Saint-Malo declaration, which aimed for a stronger EU military cooperation within the existing NATO obligations. It was the result of Tony Blair's ambitions and attempts to build strong institutions of European security and defense cooperation in response to the crises in Sierra Leone and Kosovo, which then fell apart after 9/11 and the Iraq invasion, where there was no real European cooperation and the momentum thus was lost. The second involves the ambitious attempts by the then German chancellor Angela Merkel and the French President Emmanuel Macron to create a European Security and Defense Union as an answer to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. These efforts ended after the election of President Joe Biden when German leaders suddenly got cold feet and became reluctant to create European structures alongside NATO. Thus, according to Henke, a lack of leadership and national security interests that were too heterogeneous are the main reasons why the EU was and is at best a geopolitical supporting act.

Like Henke, Brendan Simms<sup>21</sup> used a historical explanation. He emphasized that the EU's geopolitical and strategic weakness can only be understood by taking into account the many failed ambitious attempts of the European Community to establish common structures for security and defense policy and a genuine political union. The failure of the important Congress of Europe in The Hague in 1948, where 750 delegates from around Europe discussed proposals for a wider European political union, and of the European Defense and Political Community in 1954, which would have established a full supranational European army, as well as the former French President Charles de Gaulle's Fouchet plans in the 1960s, which Simms describes as "missed opportunities," triggered crucial path dependencies that led to the establishment of low-threshold structures in the area of foreign and security cooperation (the European Political Cooperation of 1970, which was transformed in the still merely intergovernmental Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992) and blocked more far-reaching attempts. Moreover, the American security umbrella for Europe and the absence of real external threats meant that there has been no pressure to bring together the interests and structures of member-states in these areas of highest political sensitivity. Looking to the future, Simms noted that if the EU is to become a real geopolitical force, it will need "big bang"—developments rather than small incremental steps; the EU needs its own "Philadelphia moment" involving the establishment of a full political union along Anglo-American lines.

Sönke Neitzel (Potsdam)<sup>22</sup> strongly supported the argument that NATO's presence was and is the main reason for the lack of development of strong European defense structures. The EU remains an economic giant and a military dwarf, Neitzel noted.<sup>23</sup> This is the result of the fact that European integration has pursued fundamentally different directions and goals since its inception in the form of the Euro, the Schengen Area,

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<sup>21</sup> See also Simms's germane books: Brendan Simms and Benjamin Zeeb, *Europa am Abgrund. Plädoyer für die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa (Europe on the Brink. A Plea for the United States of Europe)* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2016); Brendan Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, From 1453 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> See also Neitzel's most recent book: Sönke Neitzel and Bastian Matteo Scianna, *Blutige Enthaltung: Deutschlands Rolle im Syrienkrieg (Bloody Abstention: Germany's Role in the Syrian War)* (Freiburg: Herder, 2021); Neitzel, "National Cultures of Military Intelligence? Comparative Perspectives," in: Simon Ball et al., eds., *Cultures of Intelligence in the Era of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 13–33.

<sup>23</sup> This expression is an adaption of the famous statement of the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs Mark Eyskens from 1991, that Europe was "an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm."



and the Single Market, and that defense has always played at best a third fiddle role in the unification process. At the same time, Neitzel expressed doubt that the EU will be able to afford this military reticence in the future. The Ukraine crisis has awakened the Union from its slumber, showing on the one hand that the EU was woefully unprepared, and on the other that the previous economic and diplomatic approach of “Wandel durch Handel” (change through trade) had failed. As a result, he said, the EU is under great pressure. Although Neitzel agreed with Simms’s general diagnosis, his prognosis was quite different: Despite Brexit and the Chinese challenge, the EU will not be able to become a true global player since the security interests of the member-states are too divergent, and the will to supranationalize each state’s own military equipment (especially tanks) is too strong. If even a war on the EU’s own doorstep could not lead to a process of military reinforcement and stepping up, the situation seems hopeless, Neitzel concluded.

In the ensuing plenary discussion, the prevailing view (Simms, Neitzel, Geppert, Ludlow, Henke, Rödder, Gavin) was also that the strong presence of NATO was and is the main reason for the geopolitical weakness of the EU. The existence of the Atlantic Alliance has blocked ambitions and attempts of the EU states for further military cooperation—with a strong need not to annoy the Americans—so that a European Security and Defense Union has always been a “nice to have” and not a “must have” (Ludlow). Under these conditions, the member-states were not obliged to seriously coordinate their very different and individual strategic and security concepts. Laurent Warlouzet (Paris), supported by Geppert, Simms, Henke, and Neitzel, emphasized that it has been primarily the two central powers in the EU, Germany and France, which, for different reasons, act reluctantly and block attempts to establish supranational structures for European military cooperation. France does so because of strategic independence as its *raison d’état*, and Germany acts as such for historical and transatlantic reasons. Neitzel suggested that a coalition of willing and strong charismatic leaders is needed to launch a successful initiative, as with the highly successful Airbus initiative in the 1980s.

Rödder and Bastian Matteo Scianna (Potsdam) supported this idea, suggesting that a coalition of the willing (the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, Great Britain, etc.) could build assertive and effective military structures outside the EU, while allowing the EU to focus on core areas where the Union can be truly successful. Gerlinde Groitl (Regensburg) then brought a new perspective to the discussion by pointing out that the whole concept of European autonomy is flawed in itself because there will always be US involvement in European security. Ludlow agreed, adding that the EU should not be considered a disappointment because of its military weakness alone, as it has achieved much in many other areas. On the question of future developments, most participants agreed that in view of the major challenges—the Ukraine war, the Chinese challenge/Taiwan situation, growing pressure on the EU from the US to become more independent from China—the EU has little choice but to develop its strategic autonomy in a sustainable way. Only then, Xiang added, will China be able to take the EU seriously politically. And Jarzabek added that it was above all up to Germany, as the most important and powerful state in the EU, to make a major contribution to this, also in order to reduce the growing mistrust in the Baltic states, Poland, and the Czech Republic over Germany’s perceived enormous reluctance to act after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

### **Panel Four**

The fourth panel explored how the post-Cold War order was perceived from a Chinese vantage point and how the developments in Europe in the 1990s may have fed into the shaping of the Indo-Pacific region in

recent decades.<sup>24</sup> Rana Mitter<sup>25</sup> began the first of three statements with a reflection on Chinese concepts of international order. According to Mitter, these center around the idea that international politics tighten and open up, with the behavior of Chinese leaders adapting accordingly. The Chinese interpretation of developments in Europe in the 1990s and their implications for global order set China on a path that coupled economic reform with political continuity (of sorts). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was determined to avoid the fate suffered by the Soviet Communist Party under Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership, and consequently cracked down harshly on the 1989 Tiananmen protests and purged liberal reformers who were keen to democratize Chinese politics from the party. At the same time, however, the 1990s and early 2000s were defined by a considerable degree of liberalism, particularly with respect to economics. China took the opportunity to embed itself in the US-led structures of the liberal international order, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and largely refrained from challenging the US position in East Asia. While American power in the region was largely military-based, Mitter explained, China proceeded to expand its influence in the region predominantly in economic terms. Only in recent years, under the increasingly authoritarian leadership of President Xi Jinping, has China begun to actively challenge the American military predominance in East Asia.

Using the lens of international relations theory, Gerlinde Groitl<sup>26</sup> provided an exposition on the development of the present strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the decades since the end of the Cold War. Groitl explained that the process of "order-building" was a strategic necessity, for the natural state of anarchy in international politics was not conducive to peace and economic prosperity. Crucially, only great powers, which are endowed with a certain economic and military potential, are in a position to engage in the practice of order-building. How a state goes about building an order, in turn, is a strategic choice that flows from its interpretation of the existing order in relation to its defined interests. Given this premise, Groitl explained, it was pre-ordained that a CCP-led China would challenge the liberal post-Cold War order.

To Groitl, this was already clear before Xi assumed power. Revisionist intent and revisionist opportunity are the key factors that explain Chinese foreign policy. The CCP worldview is incompatible with the Western conception of a liberal international order. From this fundamental incompatibility stems the CCP leadership's clear intent to see the liberal order replaced. The revisionist opportunity was offered in recent decades by a lack of understanding on the part of the Western powers of these Chinese intentions and an unwillingness to maintain effective deterrence, which is costly. Given that the liberal order is worth preserving, Groitl concluded, a policy of neo-containment is now necessary to check the growing Chinese challenge to it.

Xiang Lanxin<sup>27</sup> focused his remarks on contemporary politics, specifically the present possibility of further escalation between the United States and China. The central issue, according to Xiang, is that the current US administration is consistently and deliberately undermining the principle of strategic ambiguity with respect to Taiwan, which has underpinned Sino-American relations ever since the 1970s. China has been observing this turn in US attitudes for years and has been preparing accordingly. Xiang maintained that while the West is only now beginning to talk about de-risking, China has been systematically de-risking for years already. China

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<sup>24</sup> On the impact of the end of the Cold War on Chinese foreign policy and how China approached the post-Cold War order see also: Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy Since the Cold War*, 4th ed. (Lanham: Boulder, 2016); Kai He, *China's Crisis Behavior: Political Survival and Foreign Policy after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Spohr, "How Europe's and China's Cold War Exits Shape Today", *Yale University Press* (blog), 16 March 2020, <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2020/03/16/how-europes-and-chinas-cold-war-exits-shape-today/>.

<sup>25</sup> See also Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Groitl outlines her argument in detail in her most recent monograph: Gerlinde Groitl, *Russia, China and the Revisionist Assault on the Western Liberal International Order* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

<sup>27</sup> Xiang's most recent monograph highlights the internal debates in China over the degree of Westernization as an important factor to explain how China interacts with the West on the global stage: Lanxin Xiang, *The Quest for Legitimacy in Chinese Politics: A New Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 2019).

is thus well prepared for any further escalation up to and including overt military action over Taiwan. According to Xiang, this fact is not fully appreciated in the West.

Moreover, communication channels have virtually broken down completely, with constructive dialogue no longer possible. China and the United States have reached a point where concessions are offered that the other side does not want, and things are demanded that the other side cannot give. It is a deadlocked situation that is prone to increase, not decrease, the likelihood of conflict. Turning briefly to Europe, Xiang outlined that China greatly welcomes European moves towards strategic autonomy. China would appreciate having Europe as a kind of buffer zone between itself and the United States. Ultimately, multipolarity promises more stability than a unipolar or bipolar structure, which is why China is an active proponent of multipolarity. Xiang concluded that from the Chinese perspective, the assumption of China's leading position in such an order is not understood as a "rise," but rather as a "restoration" of Chinese power in the long durée of history.

The discussion that followed these introductory remarks largely revolved around the present state of Sino-American relations and the possibility of military conflict over Taiwan. Mitter made the observation that the West tends to conflate the strategic case for defending Taiwan with the moral values-based argument, which makes it very difficult to see how a compromise with China can be reached. Xiang outlined that a further issue complicating a potential dialogue over matters such as Taiwan is the fact that China does not in fact have any conception of universal human rights, which is so central to Western thinking. Schake seconded the interpretation of the developments of the past decades offered by Groitl, emphasizing the agency on the part of China actively to choose confrontation over seeking to further embed itself in the order it had so clearly benefited from after 1990.

### Panel Five

The fifth panel explored the "unipolar moment" that the United States is said to have enjoyed in the years immediately after the end of the Cold War. Did such a unipolar moment exist, and, if so, was it possibly squandered by the United States and its allies throughout the 1990s?<sup>28</sup> These questions guided the panel that began with a statement from Mary Sarotte (Washington, D.C.).<sup>29</sup> Sarotte prefaced her remarks on the specificities of the developments of the 1990s with a general remark on the nature of international politics. According to Sarotte, international politics is generally defined by a more or less stable state of stasis or equilibrium. Yet there are intermittently moments of punctuated equilibrium, which create genuine, albeit usually brief, "ordering moments" following in which a new equilibrium is reached. The collapse of the Soviet Union was an instance of extreme punctuated equilibrium, with the ordering moment that followed it correspondingly large.

Sarotte explained that from a US perspective, there were three priorities following 1989/90: bringing the Central and Eastern European states into NATO; providing for Ukraine, that is to say, to define its place in a post-Cold War world; and finding a mode of cooperation with a post-Soviet Russia. These three aims were in tension with each other. The key to keep moving along all three tracks in parallel, Sarotte argued, was the Partnership for Peace, since every country could be a member of PfP and it would not have drawn a new line

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<sup>28</sup> See Charles Krauthammer's original definition of the term "unipolar" in: Charles Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy For A Unipolar World* (Washington, D.C: AEI Press, 2004). For studies on American foreign policy before, during, and after this alleged "unipolar moment" see: G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*.

<sup>29</sup> See also: Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2022).

through Europe. The ambiguity of PfP, Sarotte emphasized, would in fact have proven useful in fulfilling three outlined aims simultaneously. Instead, she concluded, the period in which this could have been done was squandered in the sense that PfP was ditched and consequently only one of the three priorities, namely the admission of Central and Eastern Europe into NATO, was achieved, with disastrous consequences, particularly for Ukraine.

Kori Schake<sup>30</sup> offered a different take on the story of the 1990s in her introductory statement. Schake argued that the United States had not in fact that historic opportunity offered in the wake of the end of the Cold War. For one thing, the situation, and the challenges it posed, was never as clear-cut as it is often presented as having been. Under immensely difficult circumstances, the United States and its European allies successfully admitted those states into the structures of the Western order that actively wanted to be part of those structures, Schake explained. Particularly in the area of trade, the period after 1990 witnessed impressive successes. China was admitted to the WTO and the United States introduced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Moreover, the notion that America has forfeited its position of preeminence since the 1990s is not tenable, she argued.

To this day, the United States retains remarkable convening power and is capable bringing order to various regions of the world through the formation of coalitions that are voluntarily joined by states in those regions. The crucial factor that explains the incredible staying power of the United States, Schake explained, is the large margin of error afforded to the United States, especially by its allies, due to its vast economic and military potential, as well as its liberal-democratic constitution. With respect to the US approach to Russia post-1990, she remarked that US policymakers initially deemed the route post-Cold War security to reside in Moscow, until it was realized that Russian conceptions of security were incompatible with those of the western liberal conception.

In the discussion that followed these statements, several participants questioned whether the PfP could in fact have been a viable alternative to NATO enlargement. In response to this, Sarotte made clear that in her view PfP and NATO enlargement need not have been mutually exclusive. PfP would in a way have provided the cover for NATO enlargement, embedding it in a wider framework more amenable to Russia. Geppert and Neitzel voiced their skepticism that such an approach could have worked. After all, wrapping NATO enlargement in the PfP would not have blunted the reality of NATO enlargement, with which Russia would very likely have taken issue sooner or later. The participants further pointed out that it is unclear how the PfP would have measurably altered internal developments of Russia, which were largely unfolding independently of the wider geopolitical decisions being taken during this period. Spohr offered the view that the whole idea of a unipolar moment is in fact a retrospective projection.

A closer look at the period shows that the moment was far more muddled than is typically appreciated. There were a whole range of brushfire conflicts around the world (Somalia, Haiti, the Middle East) as well as a strong focus on the future global role of Japan, which was accompanied by much discussion of the United States as an increasingly pacific power that might draw down on its presence in Europe. In combination, all these developments made for a moment of extraordinary complexity. Kofman concluded the discussion with a reflection on the importance of the Kosovo intervention in the late 1990s. Kofman outlined that from the Russian perspective this confirmed the West's ability and willingness to use force without prior consultation in an area that Russia considered to be of vital interest.

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<sup>30</sup> See also: Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017); Schake, *America vs the West: Can the Liberal World Order Be Preserved? A Lowy Institute Paper* (New York: Penguin Random House Australia, 2018).

## Panel Six

In the sixth and final panel, Rödder and Gavin brought attention back to the central questions of the conference: was the post-Cold War order sustainable? Were there sustainable alternative paths? And what could and should international politics learn from the history of the post-Cold War order? Regarding the first two questions, the participants generally agreed that the historical situation in 1990 was too one-sided, the dominance and attractiveness of Western institutions and path dependencies too strong for alternative paths—such as the pan-European CSCE structure or a Russian integration into NATO—to have become a serious option. Therefore, the unipolar moment was too powerful for the West to really have considered integrating Russian perceptions, fears, and ideas. At the same time, it was also common sense that some promising opportunities were missed in 1990 and the following years because of this moment of triumph (or even hubris) and superiority of the West. For example, Western politicians paid too little attention to the perceptions and interests of Central and Eastern European states and severely underestimated the rise of China, while the pursuit of the Partnership for Peace concept had some potential for building longer-term bridges between West and East.

What, then, are the main lessons of this conference, and what can international politics and politicians learn from the history of the post-Cold War order? Referring to Gustav Stresemann, the influential German chancellor and foreign minister of the Weimar Republic and Nobel Peace Prize winner of 1926, Rödder began by emphasizing the enormous importance of incorporating the ideas and perceptions of partners or even opponents into one's own deliberations, even in moments of great triumph, and of recognizing empathy as an important part of general strategic orientation. With reference to the famous Prussian chancellor of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck, Rödder asked whether it is not generally necessary to pay more attention to the ongoing readjustment of orders than to the great moments of order-building. Xiang then stressed the importance for the West to seriously question its concept of “universal” values and orders; he warned against a persistent equation of the concept of global order with that of the Western liberal-democratic order, which has made and will make relations and cooperation with China enormously complicated and conflictual. Xiang, therefore, recommended that Western policymakers pay more attention to the concept of culturally and regionally specific notions of order.

Sluga supported the idea of keeping distance from Western-dominated concepts, and Warlouzet added that the West is called upon to take into account the varieties of order and capitalism. Henke then stated that there is a strong need to find a new strategic equilibrium as in the times of the Cold War in order to avoid future clashes, while Neitzel pointed out that this equilibrium was an illusion and that there will always be clashes from time to time. In the spirit of a closing statement, Behrends summarized that all these issues surrounding the current and potential new order will be decided directly in the Ukraine war, a point on which the participants agreed.

Thus, even after three days of discussions and six panels, there were still a variety of opinions and attitudes, which is not surprising given the complexity and political sensitivity of the underlying issues. But what the high-level, high-quality, multi-perspective discussions have shown first and foremost is that the question of the end and failure of the post-Cold War order is not only highly relevant to the academic world, but also, and above all, highly crucial to the shaping of current and future international policy. The special merit of this conference is that it analyzed this highly relevant issue in all its facets and provided concrete ideas and solutions for future political action.

## List of participants:

- Jan C. Behrends, Europe University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder)

- Simone Burkhardt, German Academic Exchange Service
- Bernhard Dietz, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
- Francis J. Gavin, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.
- Dominik Geppert, University of Potsdam
- Gerlinde Groitl, University of Regensburg
- Christoph Hansert, German Academic Exchange Service
- Marina Henke, Hertie School, Berlin
- Mattias Hessérus, Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy, Stockholm
- Wanda Jarzabek, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warsaw
- Bastian Knautz, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
- Michael Kofman, Center for Naval Analysis, Arlington
- Piers Ludlow, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
- Iain Martin, The Times
- Rana Mitter, St Cross College, University of Oxford
- Sönke Neitzel, University of Potsdam
- Sergey Radchenko, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.
- Andreas Rödder, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz/Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.
- Mary Sarotte, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.
- Kori Schake, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C.
- Lukas Schmelter, State Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia/Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
- Susanne Schröter, Goethe University Frankfurt
- Bastian Matteo Scianna, University of Potsdam
- Brendan Simms, Peterhouse College, University of Cambridge
- Glenda Sluga, European University Institute, Florence
- Kristina Spohr, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)
- Laurent Warlouzet, Sorbonne Université, Paris
- Xiang Lanxin, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID), Geneva
- Vladislav Zubok, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

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