Arming for Peace

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In the political debate about the proclaimed turning point (*Zeitenwende*) in German foreign and security policy, the first truisms that could impose a veritable burden on future politics are already emerging: One is that the war in Ukraine demonstrates that diplomacy and cooperative security have failed and that only deterrence and military preparedness will help restore and secure peace in Europe. The other roughly claims that change through trade (or, in the original: through rapprochement), i.e., the notion of promoting peace through mutual interdependence, has now been finally discredited and [exposed as a political myth by the war](#).

The German chancellor's speech on February 27, 2022, stating that changed times also demand changed policies, has been readily interpreted as a plea for a primarily military-focused policy aimed at deterrence, which may now finally once again be oriented towards political realities. This is exactly what representatives of Realism in International Relations, such as John Mearsheimer, demand, but also what the [political scientist Herfried Münkler hints at](#). It is almost breathtaking how, in a very short time, entire traditions of thought are nominally being laid to rest in this debate, without any critical questioning of whether this is justified: Does the war in Ukraine really demonstrate that diplomacy or the approach of interdependence have failed? How wise can a policy be that simply wants to reverse past policy by means of a „turning point"? Anyone who complains about the lack of strategy in German foreign and security policy, as so many do in this blog series, must be clearly concerned about this. This is the starting point of this article, to demonstrate that peace cannot be based on military deterrence and containment alone, but also depends on interdependence and cooperation in common institutions if it is to be sustainable. Those who want peace must therefore arm themselves for peace, militarily and politically!

Have diplomacy and cooperation failed?

The failure of diplomacy and cooperation is commonly attributed to two rather contradictory arguments: The first assumes that the West underestimated or disregarded Putin's aggression for decades and [reacted with appeasement to Russian aggression where deterrence and containment would have been necessary](#), i.e. at the latest with the Russian annexation of Crimea. This argument refers to Putin's texts and speeches about a new Russian empire and his denial of Ukraine's claim to statehood, all of which were long known.

The second argument originates in the Realist School of thought in International Relations, which argues geopolitically and sees the failure as much more fundamental. Here, it is the belief in cooperation per se that is responsible: This argument is not about Putin's aggression, but that of the West, above all the United

States, having extended its sphere of influence further and further east through NATO and thus to Russia's doorstep. The West's mistake, so the argument goes, is to have overlooked the fact that Russia, as a great power, would not tolerate a state oriented towards the West on its borders. This criticism refers to Putin's famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, in which he warned NATO not to admit Georgia or Ukraine. From this perspective, the war with Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the destabilization in the Donbass, were clear signals that red lines would be crossed, which the West ignored. In this respect, the West failed to heed the realities of great power politics, and Ukraine is now paying the price. „It's not imperialism; this is great-power politics," as John Mearsheimer put it in an [interview with the New Yorker](#).

Depending on the argument, then, it was either appeasement towards Russia or aggression towards Russia that (among other things) brought about this war. What both lines of argument agree on is that they criticize the idea of a cooperative security order with Russia in Europe as an illusion or outright mistake. In doing so, however, both generously overlook the many achievements of this order.

The unrecognized achievements of the cooperative security order

With the implosion of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc in the late 1980s, the strategic debate on how to deal with the situation began: containment or integration was one of the central questions. In the end, it was not least the goal of a rapid reunification of the two German states that gave preference to integration and, accordingly, a cooperative security structure in Europe. This would not have been possible without the consent of the Soviet Union. With the transformation of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 into a binding treaty system, laid down and implemented by the Charter of Paris of 1990, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe, an order was established based on the three pillars of territorial integrity, sovereign equality, and the duty to settle conflicts peacefully. This cooperative security order, underpinned by joint arms control agreements and confidence-building measures as well as the promotion of democracy and human rights, created the conditions for the transition to a peace order in Europe: it made possible the waves of liberalization and democratization in Eastern and Central Europe and it ensured the rapid reunification of Germany. Without a commitment to cooperative security, this would not have been conceivable during this period.

Nevertheless, this cooperative security order did not hold. Problems already began in the late 1990s and intensified in the 2000s. One element was the successive enlargements of NATO and the EU. In the 1990s, this was still manageable from the Russian perspective because NATO sought consultation with Russia on its enlargements and made substantial concessions (such as the assurance to not permanently station troops in NATO's Eastern European states and, later, the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council in response to the admission of the Baltic states). However, NATO's role in the Balkan wars and the increasingly evident alignment of Georgia and Ukraine with Western Europe and NATO resulted in a

noticeable increase in tensions and crises. Finally, under Putin as president, the threat of military force and its use became possible again in Europe, in Chechnya, in Georgia, and in Ukraine in 2014 and today.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine destroyed the cooperative security order in Europe, but it was not the latter that is responsible for this war: Putin is. He was not pushed by anyone, he was not threatened – He simply thought he could get away with it. He assumed that the West was largely preoccupied with itself: The hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the Corona-scarred liberal societies, and not least the many conflicts in the European Union offered an opportunity he was willing to seize. In other words, norms and institutions can do nothing against an aggressor willing to enforce their interests militarily. Just as domestic norms cannot instill compliance for everyone and every subject of law in every situation, neither can international norms. For these „rogues," there are domestic law enforcement authorities and criminal law; in the international sphere, there is international law and international criminal law. Comparable enforcement authorities, however, do not exist, only decentralized law enforcement through sanction and force, i.e. military and civil coercive measures and their credible threat.

„Rogues" in political orders

But what should political orders be founded on? On the few „rogues" or on the average rule-followers? For domestic order, there is widespread agreement that it does not make sense to base rules on the few „rogues." The resulting orders would be too expensive, too repressive, and thus too unstable, not to mention their normative quality. Should international orders, however, be oriented towards these „rogues" because potent „rogues" might have weapons of mass destruction at their disposal? Ultimately, a similar trade-off applies: Orders that rely solely on repression – i.e., deterrence – are not only expensive but also less stable. The many „near misses" of the Cold War, the better known of which were the Berlin Blockade of 1948–49, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1961 and the Second Berlin Crisis of 1958–59, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation, illustrate this. Internationally, too, it is those orders which do not rely solely on repression and deterrence, but which at the same time maintain a network of common norms, rules and procedures structuring the interactions between their members, that are better positioned. This includes the promotion of interdependence between its members, as this is an essential factor in stabilizing the interest in cooperation and at the same time a prerequisite for the effectiveness of economic sanctions and their credible threat.

A future peace order therefore requires more than military deterrence and defense capability, even though these are essential for constraining the few but potent „rogues." To be sustainable and stable, interdependence and common norms and institutions are also needed to deal with such rogues. Given the brutalized warfare of the Russian regime in Ukraine and the evident war crimes in Mariupol and more recently in Bucha, this new order is currently little more than a thought.

Controlled disengagement

Above all, we are presently witnessing the further dismantling of the old order. Politically, this can be observed in Russia's exclusion from the Council of Europe, in Russian hints that the OSCE or the remaining arms control agreements are also up for debate and, last but not least, in the path of disentangling national economies from one another, pursued through the sanctions packages and private sector action. More and more companies are withdrawing from Russia, even those that are not legally affected by the sanctions, in order to pre-empt future sanctions, to avoid negative press or following moral outrage. Work is also underway on longer-term disengagement, for example regarding critical infrastructure and resources, such as the energy sector. This form of controlled disengagement is necessary to prevent Russia from continuing to use interdependence as leverage in the conflict. Such interdependence can be weaponized when trade networks are extremely asymmetric, meaning that one node occupies such a central position in a network or supply chain (for example, endowment with natural resources) that it can blackmail others. Russia has already threatened to do just that with regards to energy supplies in Europe. But weaponized interdependence is by no means a Russian phenomenon; China has also attempted this, as has the U.S. in the field of financial market transactions: one can think, for example, of Europe's helpless efforts to do something about U.S. financial sanctions against Iran. Therefore, interdependence does not automatically produce positive effects for international orders; the orders' quality and framework as well as their safeguarding are decisive.

Controlled disengagement, i.e., the dismantling of such extremely asymmetrical linkages through the establishment of alternative supply chains and own redundancies, can turn dangerous when it spins into uncontrolled disengagement, in which further linkages are destroyed indiscriminately. Tendencies towards this are already visible at present, for example in the fields of culture and the arts and sciences, where channels are being cut off through the rejection of joint programs and exchanges. This reduces the ability to gain insight into the other society's reality and thus to develop empathy for one another. No one should reach out to Putin or other war criminals, but one can still concede that it is important to maintain contact with certain spheres of Russian society. This is all the more true in a situation where it is well known that the Russian population is subjected to non-stop propaganda by its own leadership.

Now, many think that interdependence has been discredited as a peace strategy per se by this war. But again, experience tells a different story: Of course there are highly asymmetrical relationships in which actors are extremely unequally vulnerable to a breakdown of interdependence, or strong interdependencies that generate their own sources of conflict precisely through their intensity. However, those interdependencies between great powers in which there are mutual expectations to derive future gains from interdependence, for instance, are conducive to peace because neither side has an interest in risking these gains. This is true, of course, only when that risk is present, i.e., when walking away from cooperation is fraught with the expectation of significant retaliation.

Therein lies the strategic error that the West may have made in dealing with Putin's Russia: At the expense of security, strongly asymmetrical and therefore disadvantageous interdependencies were entered into and the possibilities of retaliation were neglected. Brandt's Ostpolitik, which is often used as a symbol for the failure of peace through interdependence, was aware of this. Without deterrence as a framework, there can be no rapprochement. It must be possible to effectively monitor and then deal with the disengagement from cooperation, so that all „partners" can be sure that they will face serious consequences if they disengage and that those who do cooperate will not „risk their heads" in the process.

The German *Zeitenwende* now needs to answer a single, major strategic question:

Given the 21st century setting of a highly specialized world economy and high information uncertainty, how can both military deterrence and cooperation be brought and thought together?

A German version of this article has been published here.