

Ai: Dr. Keller, terrorist attacks in the heart of Europe, Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy, countless trouble spots in the Middle East and North Africa, streams of refugees heading to Europe – in the face of these developments, some are calling attention to a “new insecurity” in the political landscape. Is there anything to back this claim? Has the world really become more dangerous over the last few years?

Patrick Keller: The world has always been dangerous. There is a false nostalgia for the supposed stability of the Cold War era. Nonetheless, it is true that in recent years we have been confronted by an array of different crises simultaneously. Globalisation and the rising level of global interconnectedness, resulting in countries being affected by geographically distant crises all over the globe, are only partly responsible for this development. For the most part, this is the outcome of gradual power shifts in the international system, accelerated by revolutionary technological advances, both of which are exerting pressure on the post-World War II order.

Ai: What kind of power shifts do you mean?

Patrick Keller: We are in a period of transition; the Old is coming to an end, but we still don't know what the New will look like. This applies to both the shape the digital age will assume and the interrelated power politics of the new world order. The past twenty years have been a very long unipolar moment of American hegemony, based on the order that was predominantly created and established by the United States after 1945. Now we sense that this hegemonic order is breaking down – particularly as a result of China's increasing economic and political power, but also due to the dark side of globalisation, namely the empowerment of all kinds of non-governmental organisations, from classic NGOs to international corporations and terrorist networks.

And the new weakness – or at least the crisis of self-confidence – of the West, represented in its less-than-successful interventions, such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, as well as in the economic and financial crisis of 2008, is encouraging dissatisfied actors to openly question the status quo. On top of this, when we accept that, despite all the prophecies of doom, the US is still far more powerful than any of its challengers, things become really complicated and even potentially dangerous, since misjudging one's opponent's capacities and determination can often lead to violence.

Ai: So who do you think the “opponents” are, and what risks do they pose?

Patrick Keller: The word “opponent” is of course a bit thorny in the diplomatic sense; I use it here in a rather theoretical sense. But there's also no point beating about the bush. The above-mentioned actors aim for a fundamentally different social order than the one we enjoy in an open society like Germany. They aim to widen their sphere of influence, and consider that their claim to power is threatened by the appeal of liberal ideas. I'm referring to major authoritarian powers such as China and Russia, but also smaller powers, such as Iran and North Korea, as well as terrorist organisations, such as the so-called Islamic State. These “strategic competitors” are clearly named in the US's latest strategy papers, such as the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy. The specific threats they pose are very different. These range from propaganda to political pressure, including sabotage and terrorism, all the way up to military force.



In light of this, it is necessary to keep a large number of instruments in both effective and operational shape so as to counter these dangers and mould the strategic environment in a positive way.

Ai: You referred to the empowerment of non-state actors as the “dark side of globalisation”. Of course that’s true of terror networks such as the so-called Islamic State. But what about global corporations like Amazon and Facebook or NGOs like Greenpeace and Transparency International – isn’t there an upside to their growing influence?

Patrick Keller: Of course, it’s not a matter of black and white, and there are obvious advantages.

But we were talking about political unpredictability, and the new power of these organisations, which has mainly been created by digitalisation and the internet, is a major factor in the changes that people find so unsettling – even if in the end (perhaps by means of prudent policies) it turns out that these changes have brought benefits to the majority of people. Now this also applies to the international order: when non-state actors gain considerable global influence, this disturbs the existing state-based system. That has nothing to do with whether you agree with the aims of an organisation such as, let’s say, Greenpeace, or not. Whatever the moral



Immutable anchor: "Germany has always done just enough to establish its ability to form alliances and maintain US protection." [Source: © Ford Williams, U.S. Navy, Reuters.](#)

standpoint of an NGO may be, I would still question their democratic legitimacy, particularly as compared to the elected leadership of a liberal state.

In any case, we are currently undergoing a process of realignment, of finding a balance, a stabilisation of power politics – and that is always going to cause friction.

Ai: In this context, could one perhaps argue that the lack of security in question has changed little over recent years and that it merely boils down to a perceived lack of security? The risk of becoming a victim of war or of terrorist violence in Europe or North America is, as we know, still negligible – and will probably remain so for some time to come. Nevertheless, one has the impression that more and more supposedly irrefutable certainties are being shaken and that there is a great sense of uncertainty: what's right and what's wrong, what's true and what's fake? How do we decide what's true and what's false, and who is the authority in such matters? What lessons have we learned from the past? What constitutes our society, which values do we stand for, and who are our partners? Do you also have the impression that something has changed, particularly in this respect?

Patrick Keller: The term “perceived lack of security” is an unfortunate one because it suggests that a lot of people are subject to vague, delusional fears. There are good reasons for talking of a new insecurity. But we have to distinguish between the different levels that you mention. One level is that of international security policy. The risk of – and readiness for – conflict has increased over recent years, and violent conflicts have moved closer to Germany – be it Russia’s incursions in Ukraine, or the metastasising war in Syria. Both have a direct impact on Germany, even though very few Germans have lost their lives as a result – if this is what you use as a benchmark. (Incidentally, people in Ukraine are being killed in the conflict on an almost daily basis. Ukraine is also part of Europe, which is why your reference to the security situation in Europe only applies to a limited extent.)

The other level is what one might call postmodern irritation, something that is currently having a great impact on societies in Europe and North America. The fact that this phenomenon is less pronounced in other societies of the West, such as Australia and Japan, is perhaps a key to explaining it. The aftermath of the social and academic revolution of the 1960s, which was particularly strong in the US and Western Europe, can be heard today as an eerie echo: the liberating cry of “anything goes” has morphed into a disorientating “what is even valid?” When we add to this the fundamental – and still ongoing – changes to our ways of living, working, communicating and consuming in the course of the digital revolution, these uncertainties are very understandable. As is the resistance of those who wish to preserve their traditions, but in doing so may, at times, run the risk of accepting the atavistic.

Ai: But isn't it symptomatic of the developments of recent years that the West's "strategic competitors", especially Russia, are consciously thinking at both levels? In this sense, insecurity can be created not only by amassing troops at the border and attacking one's neighbours, but also by systematically attempting to undermine the pillars of liberal democracy – trust in an independent press, free elections and a common set of values.

Patrick Keller: That’s right. But the two levels require disparate responses. We need to have a wide range of tools at our disposal, along with the wisdom and determination to select the right tool for the job. Security policy goes far beyond its core area of defence policy.

Ai: When you look at German and European toolboxes, what are the biggest shortcomings in your opinion?

Patrick Keller: Given recent newspaper reports, my first thought is the state of the Bundeswehr. And it’s true – after more than twenty years of drastic cuts, our armed forces are no longer in a position to fully master the tasks they have been given. That won’t change overnight, and Minister von der Leyen’s shift on defence spending is only an initial step, because it’s not just about budgets but also about other things, such as procurement processes.

But the military is not the only thing in the toolbox. I also see a need for action to protect and ensure the resilience of our critical infrastructures, such as cyber security, equipping and networking the intelligence services and federal security agencies, as well as the blue lights, i.e. the emergency services, namely the police, fire brigade, and ambulance

services. All of this applies at the German level; with a view to European cooperation, it can be multiplied. We are well aware of the obstacles to cooperation between sovereign states with political and strategic cultures that have developed in different ways.

I therefore consider the fundamental challenge – in toolbox terms – to be a social one. The citizens of this country need to understand to what extent the strategic position of our country and our continent has changed. Germany is not an island of blessed souls, isolated from the evils of the world – albeit a world with which one, of course, still does business. We are all affected and targeted by authoritarian challengers, migration trends and the breakdown of states. Therefore, more clearly than in the past, we have to agree upon who we are and who we want to be, what we stand for and what price we are prepared to pay for it. This requires political leadership, but also the involvement of the media, business, the churches – ultimately, every single one of us.

Ai: So we seem to be dealing with a considerable gap between ambition and reality. And this despite the fact that calls for Germany to finally take on more responsibility and provide sufficient funding are not exactly new. Do we perhaps have to admit to ourselves that Germany is simply not ready and, therefore, not in a position to take on more responsibility? Could it be time to adapt our ambition to reality, as the opposite is clearly not working?

Patrick Keller: I don't agree.

Ambition and reality are in a constant state of flux and are mutually dependent. Our ambition is the result of a process of political and social negotiation. Reality is the strategic position of our country, along with all the obligations that arise from this. It is natural for a country to try to achieve as much as possible with the lowest possible cost and risk, but above all to achieve the minimum required level of security. When we look at it this way we see that Germany's security policy has actually been quite successful. For years Germany has been accustomed to sheltering beneath the wings of a superpower when things got really threatening. Yet, despite all its savings and restraint, Germany has always done just enough, for example by participating in foreign missions, to establish its ability to form alliances and maintain US protection.

But given the fact that the strategic situation has begun to change drastically over recent years, we can assume, as indeed I do, that this minimalistic policy will no longer suffice – not just with regard to the US, but also in terms of European cohesion. That's why the German government's policy change is so welcome, even though its speed and scope is still subject to criticism. In this situation, I consider it to be negligent to continue the attitude of the Bonn Republic and belittle our influence. Particularly because this timidity must seem like a mockery to many of our partners and allies, most of whom are weaker than we are. Who, if not ourselves, will stand up for our interests and beliefs and attempt to shape the future accordingly?

The interview was conducted by Sebastian Enskat.

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