



under discussion

[In Retreat? Western Security Policy after Afghanistan](#)

“I Miss Political Leadership”

Afghanistan and the Security Challenges of the Future

[An Interview with Professor Carlo Masala](#)

In an interview with International Reports, political scientist Carlo Masala speaks about lessons learnt from Afghanistan, China's desire for hegemony, and a new understanding of defence – while also explaining why German politics should be less guided by popular sentiment.

IR: The withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the seizure of power by the Taliban sparked a debate about the future direction of Western foreign policy. The developments in Afghanistan have been described as the “end of an era”, a “turning point”, from which appropriate lessons must be learnt. In your view, how far along are we in the process of reappraising the deployment and discussing the inevitable consequences?

Carlo Masala: Unfortunately, it must be said that the Afghanistan mission as it stands has not been dealt with politically, even in rudimentary form. There is a corresponding process in both the Federal Ministry of Defence and in NATO, but that only concerns “Resolute Support”, that is, NATO's last mission in Afghanistan. Moreover, in Germany, reappraisal came to a standstill for a simple reason: first, the election campaign, then coalition formation. Thus, when it comes to reappraising the operation, nothing has changed at the political level for months.

IR: In a newspaper interview during the summer of 2021, you yourself criticised the Afghanistan mission, in terms of how it turned out. You spoke of “liberal imperialism” having suffered a “crushing defeat”. Now, we can draw different conclusions from a “crushing defeat”. One thing is clear, however. These developments have not least confirmed the beliefs of those who already opposed deployments abroad and believe that Germany and Europe should not militarily intervene in neighbouring countries or more distant regions of the world. Can an isolationist foreign policy be a serious option?

Masala: When I said that “liberal imperialism” has failed, I was referring only to the fact that in operations like in Afghanistan or Iraq, people believed that they could transform or build political systems to resemble ours. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and to some extent also in Mali, you can see that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to export our liberal democratic, free-market systems; these attempts are met with more resistance than enthusiasm by the local elites. This approach has failed – it does not mean, however, that deployments abroad should be categorically rejected. Those deployments, and this has always been my position, must be based on strategic interests.

IR: What does that mean exactly?

Masala: Today, many risks and threats are deterritorialised. Take

Afghanistan as an example. Who would have imagined some thirty years ago that developments in a nation 7,000 kilometres away could trigger the collapse of the World Trade Center? At that time, dangers and threats were clearly delimited according to region and oriented towards the superpowers – and not deterritorialised in the sense that developments in countries that were not even previously on the radar could suddenly pose a massive threat to the security and stability in states geographically located quite far away. Such hazards cannot be ruled out in the future either. If we are to embark on an international mission again in future, we need to link it with realistic objectives that can be achieved on the ground. And we need to back up these objectives with the appropriate resources.



IR: You emphasised the importance of strategic interests. But what about the frequently invoked values? Does this component no longer play a role?

When you have a situation like Rwanda in 1994, where there is genocide, then our set of values dictates that we consider the extent to which military intervention to prevent or end the violence is sensible and right. For me, the follow-up is important.

IR: What do you mean by that?

Masala: Yes, of course, this plays a role. Here's another example.

Masala: Let me construct this hypothetically using the above-mentioned example of Rwanda. Suppose we had intervened there to stop the genocide. Afterwards, we would have attempted to do something within that state to prevent a similar event from recurring. And at such a point, in my view, we should proceed in a more interest-driven and realistic manner. I believe it would suffice to take precautions to ensure the genocide cannot be repeated. This is also possible without trying to establish our system there.

IR: In your view, what are the most significant foreign policy challenges that will shape the next few years or decades for Germany and Europe?

Masala: The challenges are all on the table, and people are also aware of them. I consider emerging revisionist great powers to be the most significant security policy challenge that we face. And that brings us to Russia and China. On a functional level, the issue of migration will occupy us for years to come. And with COVID-19, we've seen that pandemic issues – and researchers have been saying this for 15 years – are an extreme challenge for the Western world.



Systemic rivals: "There is an urgent need to support the US in preventing Chinese regional hegemony in Asia", says Carlo Masala. [Source: © Jonathan Ernst, Reuters.](#)

IR: Let's stay with the term "revisionist great powers" for a moment and look first at the Far East. What does China's development mean for us?

Masala: Historically we're in a situation where we may experience a shift in the balance of power within the international system from the Americans to the Chinese – or at least, some kind of new bipolarity. This is a challenge that we must confront. We've known it for a long time. We see how China operates. In principle, the country is following the textbook of an emerging great power and superpower.

IR: What does the textbook say?

Masala: China started with internally developing its country, followed by modernising its military, then began the ongoing attempt to establish regional hegemony. This is the prerequisite for developing globally and becoming a serious challenger to the United States. We can already anticipate the next steps. Unless Chinese hegemony in Asia is prevented, we'll be confronted with China's ambitions to achieve global dominance.

IR: And what does this mean for German and European foreign policy?

Masala: There is an urgent need to support the US in preventing Chinese regional hegemony in Asia. The focus here is on strengthening regional partners, be that Japan or Australia. Germany needs to, and it has recognised it, make an active contribution to this effort. At the same time, we need to become a bit more economically independent of China. The more economically dependent we are on China, the weaker our position. As long as we are not prepared to do this, making a decisive contribution will prove challenging. So, you see: such a course comes at a price. We need to talk openly about what price we're willing to pay.

IR: Besides China, you mentioned Russia. Russia seeks to exert influence in various ways: militarily, and through means often referred to as "hybrid warfare", which include tools like the targeted spread of disinformation or hacker attacks. What can be done about this?

Masala: For many of these things, we don't really get anywhere with classic instruments of security politics. If we don't consider these hybrid activities as warfare by different means, we will be unable to respond appropriately. After all, this is not simply a matter of interference; it is ultimately a modern-day attempt to achieve what tanks did in the 20th century. At the end of the day, we need more resilience. This is something we haven't entirely realised yet.

IR: What exactly do we mean when we discuss "resilience"?

Masala: It's about preparing societies to be more immune to these attacks. The Baltic and Nordic states have already recognised this. They are moving towards a concept they call "total defence"; in other words, defence today is no longer

just about positioning armed forces to send military signals. Defence cannot anymore be an issue that is left to the executive or the military, but rather one that affects society as a whole. This starts with educating pupils about social media so they don't simply believe everything that pops up on Facebook. It continues with the development of redundant structures, so that countries can maintain essential functions even in the event of massive attacks on critical infrastructure. We still have a long way to go.

IR: So, competition with revisionist autocracies will therefore be a defining factor and demand a lot from us. Are the democratic states in their current form – also with regard to their internal decision-making processes – even able to compete in the foreign policy race with authoritarian states like Russia and China?

Masala: I don't believe it's a problem with the form of government.

The Cold War was won by democracies: precisely those systems that undergo “crippling” electoral processes every four to five years. It is a question of political leadership. Throughout German history, there have always been chancellors who have made fundamental decisions in foreign and security policy against the majority of the population. If Adenauer had paid attention to polls, there would be no German Armed Forces. If Kohl had paid attention to polls, there would be no euro. If Schmidt had done the same, he wouldn't have initiated the rearmament process. In my opinion, it is the task of politicians to make appropriate decisions and promote them when they believe something must happen for the good of the country. When politicians use popular sentiment to justify a lack of political decision-making, they dodge responsibility. I miss political leadership: the kind that says I'm convinced of this and I'm promoting it, even at the cost of electoral defeat.

IR: Hybrid attacks, China, Afghanistan: you have addressed some of the many foreign policy challenges. However, anyone who followed the election campaign in the run-up to the last Bundestag election could get the impression that none of it matters at all for Germany. Foreign policy was practically a non-issue during the election campaign. Why is that? Or, to put it more provocatively: do Germans simply not want to be bothered with unpleasant foreign policy questions?

Masala: Apart from a few exceptions – for example, the Iraq war or

the rearmament debate in the 1980s – foreign policy has never played a major role in German election campaigns. Yet, it must be said that journalists scarcely asked about it in debates leading up to the last election.

One fundamental problem is that the entire foreign policy discussion, you might say, is purely a Berlin discussion. Foreign policy issues need to be discussed much more all over the country, and an attempt made to involve citizens. University education also suffers from deficits. I come from a generation that had to endure things like conventional arms control – sometimes boring for many – since it was the topic at the time. These issues were then dropped. Today, an entire generation of political scientists are no longer familiar with the basics of security policy debates. This is a

problem because these are the people who could later use and communicate that knowledge as journalists or as employees in the Bundestag.

However, we must also recognise that the sense of threat has changed. Russia has had new medium-range missiles for years that it could send all the way to Berlin with nuclear warheads, and nobody in the Federal Republic of Germany seems to care.

IR: Politicians have long called on Germany to become more involved in foreign policy, which would also include a military component in some instances. For example, there's the speech of former German President Joachim Gauck at the Munich Security Conference 2014. In this respect, apart from the political fringes, there now seems to be a certain consensus in German politics. As you indicated, this is somewhat different in the population. Do politicians need to make it clearer to people what the consequences of a lack of foreign policy engagement are?

Masala: First of all, you mentioned the Munich Security Conference 2014, where the Federal President, Defence Minister, and Foreign Minister of that time basically said the same thing: Germany must assume more responsibility. This has gone down in contemporary historical writings as the Munich Consensus. However, I believe that this consensus did not exist insofar as Chancellor Angela Merkel never ultimately accepted it.

Now to your question. Foreign policy issues must be explained concretely and with examples. We cannot expect a large portion of the German population, whose primary interests are job security, health insurance, and whether they'll get a pension, to be intensely interested in foreign and security policy on an abstract level. For example, generally stating that we have an interest in keeping maritime routes clear, makes no sense for many citizens. But when we refer to events like that of the container ship Ever Given, which blocked the Suez Canal for several days, it's different. For the global economy and thus also for Germany, this meant a loss of several hundred million euros because goods did not get out or in. If a state like Iran were to deliberately block a sea route, the damage could be even greater. This is a much better way to illustrate how dependent we are on free maritime routes.

Troubled region: Carlo Masala refers to the situation in the Sahel as a "mixture of terrorist activities and failed states".

Source: © Adama Diarra, Reuters.





Or take Mali and the Sahel, which are on the brink of collapse. We cannot rule out that people will begin moving towards Europe because of the situation there – that is, a mixture of terrorist activities and failed states. I believe that when such concrete examples are used, then it is highly likely that even citizens who are not terribly interested in foreign and security policy will realise why the Federal Republic of Germany is involved in these regions or elsewhere. I need to communicate such missions – and that never happened with missions like those in Afghanistan and Mali. This only occurs in the run-up to mandate extensions. Then we have one day of debate, which briefly sweeps across the press, and the issue is settled again.

IR: So, is there a communication problem concerning foreign policy, in general, and deployments abroad, in particular?

Masala: Yes, absolutely. It's not communicated properly and, above

all, not regularly. If I don't do that, I can't be surprised when the population eventually thinks: what are we actually doing there?

On the whole, more comprehensive information is needed. Organisations like the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) do this with their regional civic education forums, but we need much more. And in many cases, we are preaching to the converted. We seldom come into contact with people who have a fundamentally different opinion on these issues. So, you have to take a broader approach and – this applies to researchers, foundations, politicians – also go where it hurts. When I am at a KAS event, there is an interesting discussion, but no one comes to me and says: Mr Masala, what you are saying is complete nonsense and dangerous. But these are exactly the people we need to reach.

IR: We're coming to the end of our interview. Let's return to the narrower frame of reference that's always mentioned in matters of German foreign policy: Europe and the transatlantic partnership. Much is currently said about the demand for more European "autonomy" or "sovereignty". How do you view these discussions?

Masala: The question is what European sovereignty actually means.

This can be understood to signify that Europe should position itself so that it's able to resist external pressure. This is, of course, a desirable goal. However, I see a great danger that European sovereignty and European autonomy are understood by some, here I'm thinking of France, for example, to mean that Europe should be able to choose a third option in the global dispute between China and the US. In other words, to avoid taking sides. I think this is fatal and completely unrealistic. This is a kind of Bismarckian seesaw politics. It might go well for a while, but eventually, the bus will drive over this swing, and it will be either the American or the Chinese bus. Europe is too weak for this. I'm not arguing that we need to adopt the US strategy for China one-to-one. But the constellation needs to be clear. The systemic opponent is China. The systemic partner is the US.

IR: What points are holding Europe back from strengthening its ability to act: political will or material requirements?

Masala: Clearly the political will. Although it is evident that material

deficits exist, these would be no obstacle if the political will were there. The fundamental problem is this: the idea of Europe moving forward as a united actor in both foreign and security policy is an illusion because the external and security interests of EU member states are so varied. If we do not rely much more on increased cooperation by a few individual European states, which must remain open for potential access in the future, then we won't move forward.

IR: So coalitions of the willing are needed?

Masala: Yes, exactly. Coalitions of the willing – and the capable.

Questions were posed by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.

Dr. Carlo Masala is Professor of International Politics at the Department of Political Science at the Bundeswehr University in Munich.