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Interjection

Other Topics

How Sustainable Are Shock Moments?

Lessons from the War in Ukraine

Frank Priess

The 180-degree turn of German foreign and security policy – at least in terms of rhetoric – only became possible after Russia's open invasion of Ukraine. While some politicians, even from the ranks of the federal government, are already slipping back into old comfortable patterns of thinking now that the first wave of horror has passed, the rest of us should ask: what must be done to better prepare ourselves for future conflicts?

Zeitenwende is the word of the hour; at the same time, and especially for the older generation, things might seem rather thrown "back to the future". In any case, it is remarkable in how short a time parameters can change – the foundations of which have nevertheless been in doubt for some time. It was only six months ago that the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) placed foreign and security policy at the top of its election manifesto, after which these issues played no role in the campaign whatsoever. Today it is clear to everyone that a little more debate and clarity on fundamental issues would have been useful. And some wonder whether Social Democratic candidate Olaf Scholz would ever have made it to the chancellorship if he had delivered his speech of 27 February to the Bundestag – in which he hawkishly called Putin's actions a violation of international law and called for drastically increased defence spending – in September 2021, while still on campaign. Of course, it is also futile to question to what extent his own party would have backed him and what effects this would have had on coalition options.

Eyes Wide Shut

At least, it appears we are now living in times of steep learning curves – although, as we are painfully experiencing, this is by no means true for everyone. "The few pages of the coalition agreement on foreign and security policy read in part like archaeological finds from an ancient civilisation," taunted Melanie Amann in the Spiegel magazine in mid-March. But the question remains why it always takes a shock experience for this learning process, for parting with illusions, while prevention is consistently overlooked. It is by no means the case, as is now commonly claimed, that "we were all wrong". Warners and wise analysts existed, but nobody wanted to pay attention to them. People did not want their practised thinking routines broken, and once again did not want to believe what an authoritarian leader said and wrote – not even when he began carrying it out. In the face of all this, to have maneuvered ourselves into such massive and unilateral energy dependence on Russia over many years is a blatant political failure, which needs to be addressed.

Russia's renewed, and this time open, invasion of Ukraine on 24 February made it ruthlessly clear that classic power politics with military means is part of the toolbox of authoritarian systems, while Germany had already largely emptied its own one. Putin's regime thus secured the cohesion of the Federation from the very beginning, starting off with the brutal war in Chechnya; it struck in Georgia in 2008, already relying on separatists at this stage; conquered Crimea in 2014, destabilising eastern Ukraine; secured influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East by supporting the Assad dictatorship at a bloody cost to the civilian population in Syria; and played along in fragile Libya, seeking more influence in Africa through mercenary deployments of the Wagner troops. All of this was flanked by nostalgic rhetoric of the great empire, which amateur historian Putin also mobilised ahead of the Ukraine invasion, and

which does not bode well for the Baltic states or for the Republic of Moldova. Belarus has long since become a vassal state of Russia without a shot being fired, as this was the only way for the country's dictator to secure power over the population. "He is driven by the dangerous, delusional idea that he has an appointment with history," the Economist says of Putin's behaviour.

Putin may well have identified Germany as a large chink in the armour of the West.

In Ukraine, at any rate, more is at stake right now – this much is clear – than the freedom and independence of the country itself. In contrast to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Russia is not a status quo power in Europe, but one that actively wants to shift borders, if necessary, by force. It sees itself in a systemic conflict with the "West", whose "decadence" Putin has more than once projected as an image of the enemy. "Putin wants to bring the West to its knees," writes Karl Schlögel, a German historian of Eastern Europe, in the daily Tagesspiegel.

In any event, Putin is testing the resilience and fortitude of the West, and had hoped that they would be as weak as he perceived them to be. Unfortunately, he had sufficient indications to believe that this resilience would not be very strong, and that after an initial stage of excitement and shock, life would quickly return to business as usual. He may well have identified Germany as a particularly large chink in the armour of the West: no sense of threat amongst the population; a correspondingly neglected armed forces; a "reluctance" to fulfil NATO obligations, confirmed by surveys; the widespread desire for "special relations based on historical responsibility" vis-à-vis Russia – and be it over the heads of Central European neighbours; economically-driven neglect of geopolitical and security policy thinking; a lack of strategic culture; latent anti-Americanism fuelled by the traumatic years of the Trump experience; the list could go on. Now, however, Putin himself has provided the trigger for change. It is slowly seeping through that security in Europe cannot currently be achieved *with* Russia, but *against* it. As some experts believe, Ukraine could be the "Fukushima Moment" of European foreign and security policy. Political scientist Peter Graf Kielmansegg concludes in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper, concerning democracies: "They will not be able to afford the naivety of the last one or two decades again."

The fact that Chancellor Olaf Scholz suddenly and unexpectedly wants to fulfil the NATO "two per cent target", flanking it with a special budget of 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr; that arms deliveries to a war zone are becoming a widespread consensus; that the Social Democrats' favourite project Nord Stream 2 has been put on hold, and that energy embargoes are being negotiated; that the sanctions measures are becoming increasingly stringent, and the closing of ranks with the US ever tighter – all this, Putin can book directly to his own account. The same is true when countries like Sweden and Finland, out of a new sense of fear, apply for NATO membership, or when a *fast track* into the EU suddenly appears possible for countries of the Eastern Partnership. If only North Korea, Syria, Belarus, and Eritrea remain loyal supporters of Russia in the United Nations, but 141 states condemn its behaviour and 35 others abstain, this is about as unprecedented for a permanent member of the Security Council as the expulsion from the UN Human Rights Council or the Council of Europe.

Transatlantic Partnership and European Self-Reliance

It remains unclear, however, how lasting the lessons from the "Ukraine shock" will be. For some, resolve seems to already be crumbling. The to-do list is long, and the stumbling blocks are many. And straightforward, things certainly are not – no matter how clear-cut matters may currently seem.

Closed ranks: In attacking Ukraine, Russia provoked the very unity between Western nations that it had tried to undermine for years. Source: © Yves Herman, Reuters.

So once again, Germany and Europe know what should actually be done. The question is, will it be? It is astonishing how well we stand together in this crisis, and continue to bear painful sanctions, but that is not enough. Clearer steps are needed to strengthen the European defence capabilities to complement NATO, and to underpin the mutual assistance obligations under Article 42 of the EU treaty. More efficiency and cooperation instead of petty details, coordinated armament projects, pooling and sharing, truly deployable battlegroups – there are many elements, and they presuppose that national egotism and sensitivities will subordinate themselves to the common goal, also and especially in Germany. There is also a need for a credible strategic concept for lasting engagement with the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, but also for closing ranks with countries in the South, and with Turkey as a partner.

Transatlantic relations and close ties with the US are the indispensable core of European security, as the war in Ukraine has also made clear. The consequence must be to strive for these relationships, nurture them, and clarify the added value over and over again, also on the other side of the Atlantic. The fact that Europe must also assume more military responsibility in its own neighbourhood is an important aspect, but by no means the only one. For the US, the Indo-Pacific and rivalry with China play the central role for the future. This will not change even with the rather short-term new focus on the conflict with Russia in Europe – certainly not if a Sino-Russian axis becomes discernible and these states support one another.

The value that the US attaches to European allies is defined not least by their expected usefulness in the confrontation with China. This is a dilemma, particularly for a country like Germany that is closely economically intertwined

with that Asian nation, but it is not insoluble. The reduction of dependencies and diversification of supply chains would be helpful, as would close technology cooperation – as is being intensively discussed – between the EU and US. If this were underpinned by a new and comprehensive approach to free trade – so much the better! For although the current war in Ukraine is being waged in a rather conventional manner, if liberal democracies do not ensure technological leadership in high-tech, AI, and the entire digital space, they will not succeed in asserting themselves. What this means can be read impressively in the book, "Future War and the Defence of Europe", by John R. Allen, F. Ben Hodges, and Julian Lindley-French.

The "America first" idea is not alien to the Biden-Administration.

This draws attention to the fact that even without the war in Ukraine, deficits in resilience have become apparent. Over the decades, Germany has undoubtedly been one of the greatest beneficiaries of smoothly running global markets. However, trusting that they will continue to run in this manner indefinitely can lead to price-related dependencies, as we are now painfully observing, not only in the energy question with regard to Russia. In the case of critical raw materials, there are a few producers who provide the basis for our industrial products. German companies are hardly active in these fields anymore, and raw materials partnerships lack substance. International supply chains are prone to disruptions – the ongoing pandemic proves this daily. Add deliberately aggressive behaviour by key international players, and you have the "perfect storm". At the same time, Europe's remaining economic strength is the only reason it is taken seriously internationally, and is capable of imposing sanctions. But for how much longer? Without the dominance of the US dollar, main financial penalties against Russia would already be ineffective. The expansion of the euro to a similar strength is urgently needed, also for the eventuality that European and American interests might at some point not coincide. Moreover, the relative success of the current sanctions is leading to feverish efforts elsewhere to reduce dependencies and provide alternatives of their own – China is already making significant progress in this regard.

The Trump years have shown how quickly the panorama can change for Europe. Even if the Biden administration seeks close solidarity and coordination with allies, with a more harmonious tone, the "America first" idea is also not alien to this administration. Its focus is primarily directed at the American public and its own electoral opportunities. The imposition of inexplicably long travel restrictions for Europeans during the pandemic illustrated this attitude, as did the unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan. And a look at American domestic politics shows that a return to Trumpian times is by no means out of the question; even isolationism is quite popular in wide circles, after decades of too often getting their fingers burnt internationally.

Europe is therefore well advised to reflect on its own strength, however one labels it – military, economic, technological, or financial. After Emmanuel Macron's far-from-impressive election victory, the France-Germany tandem should continue to play a central role, but it is no longer sufficient. And both will have to overcome multiple misgivings. France, as the only remaining nuclear power in the EU, will have to be prepared to open up its "force de frappe" to European participation; diversify it beyond strategic nuclear weapons; take security interests in the East more seriously, and not only define them along the lines of former French zones of influence. Germany needs a different military-strategic culture and a greater willingness to invest its economic strength even more visibly in strengthening the community. Approaches in these directions are already discernible.

The World is Not Full of Like-Minded Partners

Voting behaviour in the UN has made it clear that there are important states worldwide which, despite their criticism of Russia's war policy, are not prepared to be pigeonholed into a global political friend-foe scheme. They refuse, as such, to take sides unequivocally between (Western) democracies, on the one hand, and Chinese and Russian dictatorships, on the other. This makes it clear to the traditional West that its own credibility has shown enormous deficits over the decades, beginning with the colonial history of important states, which has often not yet been addressed, and ending with military interventions that have not been legitimised under international law. Too often, the impression has been given that human and civil rights are top priorities at home, but are of secondary importance at best when dealing with other peoples. Particularly in current Asian literature, the joy over their own economic rise is also mixed with a certain *schadenfreude* over the loss of importance of the West, which had to be endured for too long as a form of arrogant head teacher.

In the West – yet even the definition of this term seems in need of reform – there is much talk of a "partnership of equals", not least in developmental policy circles, but this does not always play out in practical reality. Here, too, exists a dilemma. On the one hand, there are our own values, which we cannot, will not, and must not give up for reasons of pure *realpolitik*. Genuine partners should indeed observe minimum human rights standards. In addition, the willingness to not hinder an active civil society, to allow for democracy, and to practise the rule of law, good governance, and anti-corruption is expected. On the other hand, the number of "those like us" is declining worldwide, as can be seen from relevant indices. We should also not overdo it by immediately elevating every change implemented in our country, as an extension of the rights scale of individual social groups, to the new international "gold standard". There is clearly a need for "concentric circles" of friendly relations, as far as the closeness of cooperation is concerned, and for a distinction: not every business partner is also a "like-minded partner". Yet, they are a partner. The German Minister of Economic Affairs has recently tried to explain this to his own constituency, not least after his trips to the Gulf searching for energy alternatives.

It would be fatal to put the brakes on challenges for the future of humanity, such as climate protection.

There is no reason to hide internationally and go "in sackcloth and ashes". The systemic competition between freedom and authoritarianism can be conducted confidently. Democracies on this and on the other side of the Atlantic, but also in the Indo-Pacific region and Africa, have much to show and are attractive. Astute societies worldwide take their cues from them, benefit from their cooperation, and this, in turn, inspires discussions within these democracies. Moreover, these countries are centres of attraction for both the persecuted and the talented – and here we come full circle to Putin's Russia: the country is losing its future right now! Professional and well-educated young people no longer see any prospects there and leave. Journalists, artists, and scientists can no longer endure the threats and confinement, and they, too, seek exile with heavy hearts.

The current situation, and what needs to be done in the medium term, also offer opportunities to prove ourselves as a credible partner for the future worldwide. This will quickly become relevant with the foreseeable food crisis when supplies from Russia and Ukraine fail to arrive, or basic foodstuffs become unaffordable for many people. The cries for help from UN agencies have been unmistakable for weeks. "We are already cutting food from the hungry to save the starving," David Beasley of the World Food Programme admitted to the UN Security Council,

Don't show your colours? While, in early March, an overwhelming majority of UN members condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the vote on banning Russia from the UN Human Rights Council on 7 April showed that a considerable number of states is not prepared to take sides unequivocally. Source: © Andrew Kelly, Reuters.

according to the Spiegel magazine, warning of hunger revolts, instability, and mass flight. Quick and generous help is needed here – which is also in our own interest.

It would be fatal to put the brakes on challenges for the future of humanity, such as climate protection, following the motto: we will do that later. It is not for nothing that Armin Nassehi warns in the Tagesspiegel newspaper against desensitisation: "Even the end of the world has little informational value. The reports on this have become routine." Already, many development goals of the so-called Agenda 2030 (SDGs) have been pushed far into the distance by pandemic-related economic slumps. Many countries see themselves set back by decades and are looking for help, wherever it may come from. China has already sent a signal with its "vaccination diplomacy" and will now, like Russia, try to use the crisis to increase its own influence and create new dependencies. There is concern that major donors from Europe are now focusing all their efforts on the reconstruction of Ukraine, or that budgetary leeway will be used to cushion the effects of the crisis at home. As difficult as it may be – we have to do one without abandoning the other. Anyone who can mobilise 35 billion euros in aid for the flood-stricken Ahr Valley in the short term, or two billion to make public transport cheaper in times of rising fuel prices will be measured against this when it comes to survival issues elsewhere.

Global problems do not take a break just because we can once again only focus on a single issue, no matter how high a priority that issue may be. CDU party leader Friedrich Merz has summoned the courage to point out to the German population that the peak of our prosperity might have been reached for the foreseeable future. If, however, – and this was also part of the message – we succeed

in holding our ground now, in coping with the imminent enormous transformations, in reinventing ourselves to some extent, in really taking on a substantial role and responsibility for a strong country, also internationally, and in moving forward by forming alliances with like-minded players, then there is nothing to fear for the future.

– translated from German –

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