INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

IN RETREAT?

WESTERN SECURITY POLICY AFTER AFGHANISTAN

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

Dear Readers,

"Debacle", "tragedy", "political caesura", "end of an era" – these are just some of the reactions by high-ranking politicians to the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. These words illustrate the sense of outrage at how the 20-year engagement in the Hindu Kush came to an end, while also pointing to the profound consequences for Western foreign policy as a whole. In this sense, Afghanistan is far more than "just" a mission with a disastrous ending. Rather, the events raise fundamental questions about how the West perceives its foreign policy and the future strategic direction of security and defence policy. That also applies to the debate about pros and cons of deploying troops abroad and of international interventions. The answers to these questions will have to be accompanied by concrete actions and changes.

A wholesale rejection of international missions, as some have argued, cannot be a serious option for Germany. Carlo Masala, Professor of International Politics in the Department of Political Science at the Bundeswehr University in Munich, also stresses this point in an interview with International Reports, citing strategic and ethical reasons. He says the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have highlighted the failure of "liberal imperialism": the idea that we could export our political systems and establish them elsewhere.

The end of the Afghanistan mission also raises the question of what direction the German Bundeswehr will take in future – in an international environment not least shaped by Russian revisionism and the rivalry between the US and China. Nils Wörmer and Philipp Dienstbier explain how counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities will continue to be important, but how changes in the threat situation demand a different focus. They believe this will require the Bundeswehr to restore lost national and collective defence capabilities so as to become the main guarantor of NATO's conventional deterrence against Russia.

The events in Afghanistan also turned a spotlight on the mission in the Sahel region, and specifically in Mali. Politically, this operation has long been called into question, not least because Mali recently experienced two military coups and there were reports about a dubious relationship between its government and the Russian Wagner Group. But, as Stefan Friedrich explains, leaving the Sahel to its own devices in the current situation cannot be the way forward for Germany and Europe, since failure in this region would have a far more direct impact on our continent than events in Afghanistan. It will be important to set clearly defined goals over the long-term and to accept setbacks.

Lukas Kupfernagel and Thomas Volk also emphasise this point with regard to the situation in Libya in the aftermath of the NATO-led intervention of 2011, which they state was necessary to protect the civilian population against violence threatened and carried out by the country's ruler, Muammar al-Gaddafi. And yet, there is a lesson to be learnt from the recent history of this Mediterranean country, where foreign powers fuelled a proxy war without much restraint until the Berlin Process began in 2020. That lesson

is that if foreign powers decide to intervene under the principle of Responsibility to Protect, it may be necessary to commit to the respective country over the longer term in order to avoid causing greater lasting harm than they had prevented.
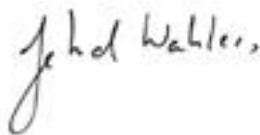
The complexity of the considerations and difficulties faced by international actors when deciding whether or not to intervene is also illustrated by the examples of Iraq and Syria. Simon Engelkes and David Labude show how the US-led mission to overthrow Saddam Hussein after 2003 and the West's largely passive approach towards the Syrian civil war that has raged since 2011, have led to (more than) unsatisfactory results. And finally, the "others" – Iran, Turkey, and Russia – have taken advantage of Western hesitancy in Syria to assert their own interests on the ground in alliance with or in opposition to Bashar al-Assad.

Another example is the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This has been simmering for more than a century and violently erupted again at the end of 2020. Thomas Schrapel looks at the origins of the conflict and at the different positions adopted towards it. Even during the recent armed conflict, the EU continued to exercise restraint, whereas not least Turkey provided military support to help Azerbaijan to victory.

Europe's neighbouring capitals are well aware that military force can be a good way of achieving their aims. Politicians and the public in Germany and Europe would be well advised not to ignore this fact, despite the impression left by the Afghanistan withdrawal and the debate about a potential new direction for our foreign and security policy. As the articles in this issue of International Reports clearly highlight, there are no panaceas or black-and-white answers in this debate. It is evident that traditional collective defence is regaining importance, but at the same time there can and will be other developments and events that will require international missions on the part of the Bundeswehr and our allies. These should be approached with clear, perhaps less ambitious goals, but backed up by the appropriate resources and a degree of strategic patience.

I hope you will find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

Gerhard Wahlers

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In Retreat?
Western Security Policy after Afghanistan

under discussion

"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.

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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.

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?

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

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In Retreat? Western Security Policy after Afghanistan

From the Hindu Kush Back to the North European Plain

German Security and Defence Policy after Afghanistan

Nils Wörmer / Philipp Dienstbier

Following the disastrous final chapter of Germany's engagement at the Hindu Kush in the summer of 2021, German security policy should finally focus on what has long been recognised as the primary threat to Germany's interests and, moreover, what is expected and demanded by its allies. Only the Federal Republic can bear the burden of conventional defence in Central Eastern and Northern Europe and act as the backbone of NATO's (non-nuclear) deterrent against Russia. To this end, the Bundeswehr must – within a few years – restore its lost capability for comprehensive national and collective defence.

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Firstly, German defence policy should return to what the German armed forces had excellently mastered for decades and, secondly, it should orient itself towards the demands of future warfare in terms of technology and doctrine – an area where Russia and China in particular are setting the standards. In this respect, the recent mission in Afghanistan provides only a very limited blueprint. Stabilisation, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism will continue to play a role in future, but will no longer be core aims determining the structure of the Bundeswehr, as was the case in the 2000s and early 2010s. Rather, the ability to conduct high-intensity combat in all domains of warfare will be the main benchmark for the performance of the Bundeswehr, for Germany's security and defence capabilities, and, not least, for its reliability within the EU and NATO. Since 2014, policymakers have taken vital decisions on establishing a corresponding capability profile for the Bundeswehr, but this should not distract from the fact that only the full implementation of this profile in the coming years will determine Germany's future role in the area of security policy. The key question is whether the German government is politically willing to help Europe assert itself in the face of the unprecedented geopolitical challenges posed by Russia and China, and whether it is prepared to contribute to military defence in a way that corresponds to the justified expectations of its allies and to Germany's political and

economic weight – namely, making the Bundeswehr once again the backbone of conventional collective defence for the protection of Europe, which used to be Germany's traditional role.

The Return of National and Collective Defence

From "Wars of Choice" to "Wars of Necessity"

Almost two and a half decades separated the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. This period represented a historical exception in European security policy. It was characterised by the fact that there was no existential threat to Germany and its EU and NATO allies. The familiar phrase "peace dividend" was circulated in European capitals, and the assumption that Germany was surrounded only by friends became anchored in the minds of Germans. Nonetheless, international politics was marked by many regional and intra-state wars and conflicts, especially in the Middle East and Africa, but also in Europe in the Western Balkans. Western military forces were deployed to intervene in some of these conflicts, mostly in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions and later in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, against vastly inferior symmetric opponents, but above all in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and stabilisation roles. In

theory, the governments of the states involved in these deployments and interventions also had the option of not participating or, as the debate in the US in the early 2000s showed[1], intervening in other countries, either alternatively or additionally. The wars waged by Western governments during this period were thus wars of choice[2].

> **The beginning of Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine in February 2014 is generally regarded as a turning point in Euro-Atlantic security policy.**
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Even during this so-called "era of intervention", with the rise of Russian revisionism from 2008, and the military ascent of China under President Xi since 2013, two developments took hold that fundamentally changed international politics. Some observers now speak of a New Cold War, while others at least recognise a systemic competition between the US and Europe on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. In order to preserve the rules-based international order and the status quo in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region, the US and Europe must rein in Russia and China and prepare to wage wars of necessity in future – but with the aim of deterring them and not having to fight them. In contrast to international crisis management, these are existential issues for allied nations. In the case of a war of aggression directed against the territorial integrity of one or more allies, there can be no other choice for other allies but to uphold their commitment to collective defence. It is now more important than ever for Western democracies to stand up for common values and interests around the world. But above all, the Western nations, which have entered into a joint defence alliance with binding obligations[3] within the framework of NATO and the EU, must be able to rely on each other as allies – in peacetime as well as in times of crisis and war.

Russian Revisionism and China's Military Rise

The beginning of Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine in February 2014 is generally regarded as a turning point in Euro-Atlantic security policy. In its wake, NATO had no choice but to reinsure its eastern member states, build up the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)[4], triple the size of the NATO Response Force, deploy four eFP battlegroups[5], and, ultimately, put a renewed emphasis on collective defence and deterrence. With regard to China, there were already signs of a shift in US policy away from Europe and the Middle East and towards East Asia (known as the "pivot to Asia") during President Obama's first term. Meanwhile, the US's security focus has clearly shifted towards creating a counterbalance to China in light of its massive military build-up since 2015. While European nations have also recognised the security relevance of the Indo-Pacific region, and developed some broad-based strategies,[6] US policy is primarily aimed at containing and deterring China.

From a European perspective, these developments mean that, for the first time since the founding of the EU and NATO, their member states no longer have uniform threat perceptions and security priorities. For the states of Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe, the main security challenge is clearly Russia's aggressive and revisionist policy. On the other hand, the Southern European countries continue to see their security threatened by failed states in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel, along with the resulting flows of refugees and migrants, and the continued existence of terrorist organisations on Europe's southern periphery. For the EU and NATO, this poses the danger that such rifts and conflicts between countries of the eastern and southern flanks regarding priorities, strategies, and resource allocation could become fundamental crises for the organisations. Moreover, in contrast to the Cold War and the era of intervention, the US cannot and does not want to bear the main burden of security engagement on the southern or eastern flanks. Much of the US's attention and military

President Vladimir Putin visits annexed Crimea in November 2021: For the states of Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe, the main security challenge is Russia's aggressive and revisionist policy.
Source: © Mikhail Metzel, Reuters.

resources are consumed by China's openly aggressive posture in the Indo-Pacific. At a Senate confirmation hearing in early 2017, Senator John McCain asked retired general James Mattis, back then nominee for the post of US Secretary of Defence, as to whether the US military was capable of deterring both China and Russia. The answer was an emphatic no.[7]

Defence Policy in Europe: Germany Bears the Main Burden on the Eastern Flank

Looking at the four largest European states with the strongest military capability – Germany, France, the UK, and Italy – the question arises as to where their strategic focus will lie in future. The UK's latest security position paper, of March 2021, appears to mainly focus on nuclear deterrence, maritime capabilities, cyber warfare, intelligence and reconnaissance as well as special forces. Along with the capability for nuclear and maritime deterrence against Russia, the UK's armed forces are particularly suited to conducting limited interventions and operations alongside the US, including in the Indo-Pacific region. British forces will have only very limited resources for land-based operations on the European continent in future. Similar to the situation in the UK, the French military spends a significant portion of its budget on maintaining and developing its nuclear forces and primarily maintains capabilities for limited interventions, stabilisation operations, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism. France defines itself

as an Indo-Pacific nation, as underlined in its Indo-Pacific Strategy,[8] so it is likely that future investments will focus more on the maritime domain as opposed to capabilities for land-based operations with heavy units. The Italian armed forces have abandoned some reforms initiated in 2013 and have received more combat brigades, including armoured units, than originally planned. Nevertheless, Italy's security focus and military capabilities are clearly directed towards the Mediterranean region, the Sahel, the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa.

The "Trend Reversals Materiel and Personnel" have fallen short of the desired results over recent years.

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Therefore, to protect Europe, it is still mainly up to Germany to restore all the forces, capabilities, and measures needed for deterrence and defence in order to stand up to Russia in a potential conflict, and thereby ultimately achieve the deterrent effect in peacetime that will mean a war never actually has to be waged. It is only for this reason – and not because of the missions in Afghanistan and Mali – that the German Bundestag increased the defence budget from just under 30 billion euros in 2011 to more than 50 billion euros in 2021. Since the new German government has promised future spending increases and more investment in other areas, such as social and climate policy, while also wanting to reapply the constitutional budget deficit limit from 2023, there is a danger that this positive trend could at least grind to a halt for the time being or even be reversed altogether.

The Bundeswehr Undergoing Transformation

National and collective defence have not only been defined (by the 2016 White Paper) as a Bundeswehr mission equally important to international crisis management, but they shape every political debate on the German armed forces' capability profile and, derived from this, their future scope, structure, equipment, and armament. As the Bundeswehr's largest component, the Army faces the challenge of reorganising its major units from the "Army 2011" structure, which is geared towards international crisis management. The "Trend Reversals Materiel and Personnel" initiated in January and May 2016 respectively, were intended to create one of the key prerequisites for this. However, both these initiatives have fallen far short of the desired results over recent years. After the Bundeswehr had, in the summer of 2016, recorded its lowest level of personnel since the conclusion of its deployment phase, with around 166,500 soldiers, the personnel target for 2027 has now been set at 203,300 service posts. In fact, the headcount has levelled off at between 183,000 and 185,000 over recent years, which means the additional personnel required by 2027 will be almost 20,000 men and women. Against this backdrop, the introduction of a compulsory (military or civil) service was briefly debated during the last administration, and a voluntary military service programme for homeland security was created. A decision was also taken to rebuild the reserve service to include around 120,000 reservists. In the area of procurement and material readiness, clear progress has been made compared to the disastrous state prevailing in 2014. Nevertheless, in 2021 the material readiness of the Bundeswehr's 71 major weapon systems averaged just 77 per cent, and was even below 50 per cent for certain important systems; mainly due to the poor condition of legacy weapon systems and at times serious delays in the supply of new, large-scale equipment.[9] Compared with the consistently high readiness levels of the old Bundeswehr during the Cold War, this is a completely unacceptable state of affairs. That is because it would have serious ramifications in the event of an actual war – namely, rapid defeat, at least in the initial operations.

Thus, at the start of 2022 German policymakers are grappling more than ever with the challenge of how best to position the Bundeswehr

for the next two decades in view of a fundamentally changed threat situation, rapid advances in technologies along with changes in the four dimensions of warfare. In every area – the land, sea, air, and cyber and information domains – landmark decisions are pending, some of which are long overdue.

> **There can be no talk of the frequently cited "rearmament". Rather, the planned steps are aimed at restoring capabilities.**
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**The Land Dimension:
Three Fully Deployed Divisions by 2032**

Back in 2021, the Inspector of the German Army, Lieutenant General Alfons Mais, had to concede that other brigades would have to provide equipment and materiel to the lead unit for the third VJTF under German command in 2023. This says everything about the condition and operational readiness of the German armed forces. The original objective was to ensure that the 37th Panzergrenadier Brigade, the designated lead unit for the NATO VJTF, had the necessary equipment and operational readiness to conduct the mission independently. The deficiencies are apparently nowhere near as severe as when the VJTF was deployed in 2019, when 30,000 individual items of equipment "from battle tanks to night vision goggles"[10] had to be borrowed in order to meet the commitments made to NATO. Nevertheless, this illustrates how difficult it will be to generate the fully deployed and operational division with three combat brigades[11] promised to NATO as an interim goal by 2027, and to achieve the target of three fully staffed and equipped divisions, with eight to ten combat brigades, as announced for 2032. Still, this target size would constitute merely 25 per cent of the strength of armoured combat units that the Bundeswehr had in 1990. Moreover, the "heavy" quality of Germany's future land force contribution requested by NATO in 2015 and promised

by Germany in the form of three tank/armoured infantry divisions (including substantial combat support forces at the division and corps levels), has already been scaled back to just one heavy, one medium, and one light division in the latest Army plans. This makes it clear that there can be no talk of the frequently cited "rearmament". Rather, the planned steps are aimed at restoring capabilities that the Bundeswehr previously possessed – to a much greater extent – but abandoned since then.

The main challenge for policymakers is, therefore, to recruit the personnel needed for this increase and to procure the necessary materiel and latest highly digitalised weaponry and command and control systems for joint multinational domain operations. Another pressing issue is the lack of individual capabilities in the land dimension. This primarily applies to the former Heeresflugabwehrtruppe, an army air defence force tasked with protecting its own combat units from enemy airborne attack, which was decommissioned in 2012. The fact that this mission was subsequently transferred to the German Air Force on a makeshift basis has now led to a situation where army brigades have limited abilities to fight combined arms missions. This represents a major military deficit, especially against a potential adversary with very strong air force and combat helicopter units. Therefore, one of the most pressing challenges is to re-establish an army air defence capability as part of an integrated air defence covering a broad spectrum, from drones at close range to tactical ballistic missiles.

The main areas of focus with regard to the land dimension include developing a successor for the Leopard 2 main battle tank under the Main Ground Combat System planned with France. An additional challenge lies in returning to the Army elements of the logistics tasks that were outsourced to the Joint Support Service and civilian service providers some years ago. Other difficulties include restoring the recently neglected command and control capability at brigade and division level and achieving appropriate digitalisation of land forces.

The Army is in the process of undertaking a radical doctrinal U-turn back to its traditional remit. Once again, it has to be able to conduct defence, delay, and (counter-)offensive operations, but this time on the Northeast European Plain rather than the North German Plain.[12] It is true that the scale and geographic scope of such a scenario has changed since the 1980s. However, basic requirements from the rapid mobilisation of reserve units (which have yet to be built up)[13] to the rapid deployment of large units across Germany remain largely unchanged. It is also important to guarantee ongoing obligations in the area of crisis and conflict management: stabilisation, training, and consulting, and, where appropriate, counterinsurgency. In line with the concept of a single set of forces,[14] the Army will in future have to generate the forces required for international missions, such as in Mali, from units set up for national and collective defence.

The Air Force requires a major overhaul of structure and equipment in both the conventional and nuclear domains.

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Defence of Allied Airspace and Nuclear Deterrence

The return to collective defence on land will only work if the Army is adequately supported from the air in accordance with the joint multi-domain approach[15]. Along with conventional defence, the German Air Force – and this sets it apart from other military branches – also has a role to play in the extended nuclear deterrence of NATO. The Air Force requires a major overhaul of structure and equipment in both the conventional and nuclear domains over the next twenty years in order to accomplish both these tasks. The foundations for this must be laid at the beginning of the current legislative period.

In conventional defence, the primary objective of the German Air Force is to contribute towards establishing a favourable air situation for NATO

air forces; without this prerequisite, land force operations would be doomed to fail. In the event of crisis, Germany has promised NATO that it will supply around ten per cent of combat mission flights. This applies both to potential air warfare in rearward Central Europe, frontline operational areas, and enemy airspace, where enemy air defences would first need to be neutralised to establish air superiority, as well as to air operations in support of NATO land and naval forces. However, some glaring deficiencies are becoming apparent in this respect. In the event of a high-intensity attack by Russia, combined with high-attrition air combat, German flying units would probably be unable to fight and operate for more than one to two days at the moment. This is because peacetime cost-cutting measures have left the Air Force without the stockpiles of ammunition, first-class armament and spare parts necessary for a prolonged operation, and the arsenals could not be quickly replenished during the transition to crisis or war. However, if Germany were to get serious about its defence mission and the role of its Air Force in warfare, the first priority would be to ramp up its readiness and operational capability. In addition, Germany, which has committed to providing four mixed operational squadrons to NATO, must be able to form large flying units of 150 to 250 aircraft in joint forces with allied air units for defence purposes. In order to improve interoperability in the Alliance in this respect, Germany, as the framework nation, is coordinating the establishment of a Multinational Air Group by 2026, 75 per cent of which will be provided by the German Air Force and 25 per cent by Eastern partners.

Ideally, such trained, operational, and functionally interoperable air forces would also benefit from sharing a common platform with sensors and weapon systems that can operate together in a coordinated manner. In NATO, fourth-generation fighter aircraft are currently being successively replaced by American F-35s. In addition to its highly acclaimed stealth capabilities, this fifth-generation fighter aircraft[16] features advanced connectivity and is de facto establishing itself as the Alliance's

Numerous challenges in the land dimension: One major task is to develop a successor for the Leopard 2 main battle tank as part of the Main Ground Combat System planned with France. Source: © Fabian Bimmer, Reuters.

new standard platform. Germany's fundamental political decision not to join the "F-35 family" so as to invest in the 6th generation combat aircraft planned with France and Spain for 2040 as part of the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), is thus proving an obstacle for the performance of integrated air forces within NATO. Even though FCAS represents a step in the right direction in terms of both armament policy and weapons technology, prioritising a system that, with all the usual delays, is not expected to enter service for more than two decades means the Air Force will face a capability gap over the medium term.

The non-procurement of the F-35 and the still pending decision about a successor to the Tornado takes on even greater political importance in the context of Germany's future role in NATO's nuclear sharing agreement. Germany's

ongoing participation in this process is an important element of risk- and burden-sharing within NATO. It increases the Alliance's cohesion and credibility and ensures that Berlin can exert a special influence on (nuclear) defence planning processes in Brussels. Since the current nuclear weapons capable aircraft, the Tornado, is completely obsolete, a successor system has to be found by 2030. The principle is that American nuclear weapons can only be carried by aircraft certified by the US military. Since the Eurofighter arguably does not meet this requirement, the F/A-18 Super Hornet and EA-18 Growler are to be procured as an interim solution – although it remains unclear whether FCAS would be able to take up the nuclear sharing role in the long term. Together, the two versions would close a gap in the Alliance's capability profile, and are therefore favoured by the German Air Force as the next best alternative to the F-35. Here, it is

important to begin work on the procurement and nuclear certification without delay in early 2022. Whether or not the new German government adheres to the decision to buy the F/A-18 Super Hornet (and EA-18 Growler) will effectively also be a decision for or against continuing Germany's involvement in nuclear sharing.

The budget will have to be stretched further in order to achieve the required increase in ocean-going vessels.

Other challenges confronting the Air Force include ensuring tactical airlift by procuring heavy transport helicopters[17] and rebuilding ground-based air defence, which had been massively reduced before 2012, in order to protect against the greatly increased threat from missiles and aircraft. In particular, the replacement of the outdated Patriot system would urgently require the development of a successor system, but politicians have repeatedly delayed this. Most recently, another long overdue step was taken with the declaration of intent to introduce armed drones into the Bundeswehr. Yet, the debate in recent years has given the impression that the use of armed drones is solely for the protection of troops on international missions. However, wars in Europe or its periphery, such as in Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya, and Ukraine, show that, in modern warfare, drones are being deployed far more widely and linked with land forces to provide air support. With the introduction of the weapon system, the Bundeswehr must now acquire this capability as quickly as possible in order to be able to compete in future symmetrical conflicts.

Enlarged Task Spectrum for Small Navy

In the maritime dimension, policymakers are faced with the problem that, historically, Germany has rarely had a smaller navy than it does today, whereas it is precisely in this dimension that the range of tasks has exploded over recent years. Germany's role as the lead nation in the Baltic and its substantial contribution to the Alliance's presence in the North Atlantic lie at the

heart of the requirements and associated commitments to counterbalance Russia within NATO. What is more, maritime missions have steadily increased, notably in the areas of embargo monitoring, and combating piracy and trafficking in the sea areas of the Mediterranean, the Horn of Africa, the Persian Gulf, and, more recently, also in the Gulf of Guinea. The growing importance of the Indo-Pacific and the need to show solidarity with allies and countries with shared values in this region through a temporary or even permanent, albeit very limited, maritime presence, has led to the emergence of a further sphere of activity that requires significant resources. Germany has promised NATO that it will provide at least 25 surface units and eight submarines on the high seas over the long term, thus ensuring the capability for surface and underwater warfare, including littoral warfare[18], anti-submarine warfare, sea mine defence, as well as maritime air defence.

The fact that the Navy has been granted a considerable share of the upcoming maritime armament projects should not obscure the fact that Germany's maritime forces are too small for these existing commitments and future assignments. The F125 class frigates (Baden-Württemberg class) most recently introduced by the German Navy are intended primarily for use in asymmetric threat scenarios, based on the experiences and requirements of the 2000s. This, along with the smaller numbers of the most recently procured classic air defence frigate F124 (Sachsen class), means the German Navy lacks combat-ready surface units for symmetric warfare. In January 2021, the Bundestag approved the purchase of four next generation F126 frigates (formerly Mehrzweckkampfschiff 180) with a non-binding option for two more ships. However, if Germany is to take a real step forward and be able to adequately fulfil its maritime assignments and obligations, it should at least use the option of procuring a fifth and sixth F126-class unit by 2027. It will also depend on the contract for the six planned next-generation F127 air defence frigates being awarded without any delays. Intended as a replacement for the Sachsen class, they should be commissioned by 2032. Following decades of underfunding, including of the naval forces, the quality of the Navy has now at least been secured at a minimum level thanks to a spending increase, most of which was approved in 2021. However, the budget will have to be stretched considerably further in order to achieve the moderate increase in ocean-going vessels that is needed for the future.

In terms of the Navy's capability profile, there are still deficiencies in the areas of mine hunting and undersea warfare. Germany is one of the few NATO allies that still has mine warfare capabilities. These are particularly important in the Baltic, but it is in danger of losing this key capability if there is a lack of procurement and modernisation. In view of the naval armament of Russia and China, the procurement of a seventh and eighth submarine with a slightly increased range can only be the starting point – and by no means the end point – for the German

Navy, especially since four of the six submarines in the existing fleet are already deemed outdated. And the most pressing question of all – the shortage of skilled personnel – also remains unresolved. No branch of the Bundeswehr was hit harder by the suspension of compulsory military service than the Navy, which has been struggling with massive recruitment problems ever since. There is currently a shortage of suitable candidates in all areas, particularly for the demanding, technical work of handling state-of-the-art equipment that has been procured or will be commissioned in the coming years.

In the cyber domain, too, the most serious problem is the huge demand for personnel.
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Growing Challenges in the Cyber and Information Space

The newest organisational area of the Bundeswehr, the cyber and information branch, is growing in importance for the performance of the armed forces on land, at sea, and in the air due to a progressive digitalisation in the military. At the same time, the growing importance of digital command and control and information systems in the Bundeswehr has dramatically increased the threat posed by cyber and information warfare; areas in which China and Russia have built up considerable capabilities and gained substantial experience through a range of operations. In the cyber and information space, first and foremost the Bundeswehr must prevent any interception, distortion, or delay of its own communications and data processing through electromagnetic attacks or cyber attacks, and build its own offensive capabilities in this area, too. Besides threats at the technical level, however, there are also hybrid attacks such as (dis)information and propaganda campaigns that influence opinion and challenge information sovereignty, especially when these campaigns directly target soldiers.

In contrast to the land, air, and sea dimensions, the particular challenge in this field is that defensive and offensive capabilities not only have to be trained and kept for defence purposes, but also need to be used on an ongoing basis to some extent, because the weapons used in the cyber and information domain are generally non-lethal and hence below NATO's Article 5 threshold; that is to say the transition from a state of peace to a state of war. This means that cyber and information warfare is ongoing, which requires the Bundeswehr to continuously defend against activities such as the undetected penetration of networks in order to compromise them in an emergency, or the influencing of developments in the information sphere. Since this is not the sole responsibility of the Bundeswehr, but must be understood as a task for society as a whole, this dimension has much stronger links to other policy areas than other military domains.

The main areas being worked on at present include developing the offensive component of the Bundeswehr's Cyber and Information Domain Service (KdoCIR) and improving its electromagnetic response capabilities; the recent decision to procure Pegasus aircraft and new fleet service ships has already strengthened and expanded signals intelligence from the air and sea. However, in the cyber domain, too, the most serious problem is the huge demand for personnel – several hundred positions are currently being created in the Cyber-IT Competence Centre alone – as well as the shortage of specialist staff in the face of competition from dynamic and attractive employers in the civilian sector. This problem is unlikely to be solved in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion and Outlook

German policymakers are confronted with quite a challenge. They have to initiate far-reaching reforms in all four dimensions of warfare in order to restore the Bundeswehr to its position as the guarantor of Europe's conventional defence. Refocusing on national and collective defence, restoring the ability to conduct operations with large military formations

in conventional types of combat, ultimately returning to its role as the backbone of NATO's conventional deterrence in Europe: these are manageable contributions that Germany is expected to make.

> **It is the task of politicians to convey to the public that German society's widely held assumption of being surrounded solely by friends is a fallacy.**
> ⎯⎯

Despite its political importance, looking back at Afghanistan will be of limited help. Clearly there is a need for a detailed reappraisal and analysis of the total collapse of structures built up over almost 20 years in Afghanistan and the subsequent end of the civil engagement. This evaluation should encompass the instruments used and their interaction – the networked approach – but it should also focus clearly on goal setting, the use of resources, and overall strategy. Germany must never again participate in a war in such a politically naive, operationally haphazard, and dishonest manner. In light of continuing engagement in the Middle East and ongoing operations in the Sahel region, lessons learnt from the Afghanistan debacle must also find their way into current policies, from the political down to the tactical level. However, when it comes to what Bundeswehr capabilities will be required in future, the Afghanistan mission does not offer many insights. The Taliban and their supporters in Afghanistan placed great pressure on the Bundeswehr in infantry combat in their area of operations. However, in terms of the intensity and scale of the engagements, as well as the complexity of the air situation, and parallel cyber operations, this is likely to pale in comparison with scenarios that the Euro-Atlantic forces have to prepare for on the eastern flank.

It is tragic that European countries were unable to independently keep Kabul airport open for a few days following the withdrawal of the last

US troops. However, it is an outright danger for Europe's security and the continued existence of the "political West" that eight years after the Ukraine crisis and a gradually deteriorating security situation on the eastern edge of the EU and NATO, Europe is still unable to establish a credible conventional deterrent against Russia without substantial support from US forces. In this respect, the end of the Afghanistan mission might even be helpful – by finally freeing up resources and, more importantly, no longer distracting from the actual existential security threat.

Thus, the first task of politicians is to convey to the public that German society's widely held assumption of being surrounded solely by friends is a fallacy. The foundation for Germany's security and prosperity continues to be the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance, both of which are by no means surrounded only by friends at their external borders. It is, therefore, not only Germany's responsibility but also in Germany's interests to guarantee the security of eastern allies. The new Federal Government needs to clearly communicate this uncomfortable truth to the German people.

Moreover, German policymakers must not misuse the – albeit justified – substantial funding needed to combat climate change and respond to the pandemic as a pretext for calling into question the hard-won increase in funding designed for the "Trend Reversals Materiel and Personnel" of the Bundeswehr. Creating a capability profile that meets the emerging threat situation, the requirements for future warfare, and the expectations of allies in the EU and NATO – measured in terms of Germany's standing in the alliances and the commitments it has made – will require substantial, long-term investment.

It remains to be seen whether the planned personnel strength of 203,300 soldiers is sufficient for meeting the capability profile. If this figure is not achieved, policymakers will have to find solutions to the Bundeswehr's glaring recruitment problems. The debate about compulsory military or civil service in Germany certainly provides a starting point here. It is true that the old form of compulsory military service was no longer in keeping with the times and required reform. However, simply abolishing it without public debate and with no detailed preparations for alternative ways of recruiting personnel is proving to be one of the main burdens on the Bundeswehr's overall capability for national and collective defence. At no point after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 would Germany have abolished military service if it had still existed at that time. The extent to which this action was a total misjudgement of the long-term security situation has also been illustrated by Russia's threats towards Ukraine in spring 2021 and again since last autumn.

– translated from German –

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1 After the rapid military success against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in autumn 2001, the US administration and, to some extent, the public debated the possibility of further "external regime change". While President Bush called Iraq, North Korea, and Iran an "axis of evil", his designated Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice went before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and identified Cuba, Myanmar, North Korea, Zimbabwe, Iran, and Belarus as "outposts of tyranny". Cornwell, Rupert 2005: From the axis of evil to the outposts of tyranny, The Independent, 20 Jan 2005, in: https://bit.ly/3xZHrl1 [6 Dec 2021].

2 A debate on "wars of choice" and "wars of necessity" was conducted in the United States primarily in the context of the second Iraq war, after Richard N. Haass, a top advisor to the Bush administration, had clearly diverged from the official line by describing the invasion as a "war of choice". Haass clearly sets out his thoughts on the matter in his 2010 book "War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars". With regard to Afghanistan, a distinction must be made between the overthrow of the Taliban regime and the dismantling of al-Qaeda structures in late 2001 as a direct response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the almost 20-year engagement that followed. In the case of the latter, the US administration had a choice. Many voices in the government repeatedly advocated a "light footprint strategy".

3 These obligations not only include the commitment to effective collective defence on the basis of Article 5 of the NATO Washington Treaty in the event of an attack against one or more allies. Euro-Atlantic allies are also required to meet their commitment under Article 3 to provide all the forces, capabilities, and measures necessary for deterrence and defence in peacetime. To some extent, Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union also imposes an obligation of aid and assistance on EU Member States.

4 The Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) is a brigade-sized combat unit within the NATO Response Force (NRF) comprising around 5,000 troops. Since 2015, the lead role has rotated among NATO member states on an annual basis. Germany led the first VJTF, which was initially set up on a provisional basis in 2015, then its Panzerlehrbrigade spearheaded the VJTF in 2019. The country is now preparing the 37th Panzergrenadier Brigade to head up the VJTF in 2023.

5 The NATO Enhanced Forward Presence, eFP, was adopted at the 2016 Warsaw NATO Summit as a way of supporting the three Baltic States and Poland. Led by the US (for Poland), the UK (for Estonia), Canada (for Latvia), and Germany (for Lithuania), multinational battalion-size battlegroups have been deployed in each of the four NATO member states since 2017.

6 While French and British Indo-Pacific policies are dominated by security concerns, the German government's 2020 Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region and the EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy provide very broad-based initiatives in which security is one field among many. German Federal Government, Federal Foreign Office 2020: Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, 2 Sep 2020, in: https://bit.ly/38AvCGK [6 Dec 2021].

7 Hennigan, W.J. 2017: James Mattis draws little flak at confirmation hearing to head Defense Department, The Los Angeles Times, 12 Jan 2017, in: https://lat.ms/3ds4WK6 [6 Dec 2021].

8 Ministère de L'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021: France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2021, p.5., in: https://bit.ly/3rGuXOm [6 Dec 2021].

9 Put simply, in too many cases the force's inventory of large equipment is barely half of the Bundeswehr's book inventory, and of this inventory, in turn, often only half is ready for deployment. Federal Ministry of Defence (BMVg) 2021: Bericht zur materiellen Einsatzbereitschaft der Hauptwaffensysteme der Bundeswehr II/2021, 15 Dec 2021, in: https://bit.ly/3rIsJMJ [24 Jan 2022].

10 Mais, Alfons 2020: Inspekteurbrief zum Wechsel der nationalen Verantwortung NRF (L) Brigade, 16 Dec 2020, in: https://bit.ly/31pJzXK [6 Dec 2021].

11 A fully equipped combat brigade, including command and support units, comprises around 5,000 troops.

12 Defence, delay, and (counter-)attack were the three types of combat that the Bundeswehr traditionally trained for and practised. The familiar phrase of fighting on the North German Plain came about not only because the 9th Panzerlehrbrigade "Lower Saxony" was (and still is) located in the Lüneburg Heath area, but also because the North German Plain would have been one of the incursion vectors of an attack by the Soviet Union, and thus one of the places where the Bundeswehr would have been prepared to mount a broad-based defence.

13 The Bundeswehr's capability profile envisages at least 60,000 active-duty soldiers and 20,000 reservists for the troop reserve by 2031.

14 The Bundeswehr faces the challenge that its diverse capabilities are mapped into a single force structure that can perform all tasks equally but not simultaneously. This situation is known as a "single set of forces". The concept of the Bundeswehr states in this regard: "The Single Set of Forces consists of forces and means limited in scope, which fulfil all tasks of the Bundeswehr in a broad spectrum of different operational possibilities. [...] The Single Set of Forces is therefore fundamentally geared towards performing the most demanding tasks at any time. [...] This is a prerequisite for multifunctionality and multi-role capability and enables flexible action to carry out tasks." BMVg 2018: Die Konzeption der Bundeswehr – Ausgewählte Grundlinien der Gesamtkonzeption, Apr 2018, p.11, in: https://bit.ly/3lEhZNh [6 Dec 2021].

15 The multi-domain approach goes back to the "AirLand Battle" doctrine developed by the US Army in the 1980s. It is the basic concept of modern warfare and aims to conduct military operations holistically across the various operational domains (land, air, sea, cyberspace and space) through integrated command and control (C2), thus interweaving the various potential battlefields. Jones, Marcus A. / Diaz de Leon, Jose 2020: Multi-Domain Operations – Awareness continues to spread about the importance of operating in multiple domains, The Three Swords Magazine 36, Nov 2020, pp. 38–41, in: https://bit.ly/3G615PT [3 Jan 2022].

16 The stealth of an aircraft is characterised by the use of certain design features, technologies, and combat tactics that make it more difficult to detect, or that delay its detection, thus increasing its survivability.

17 The fleet of medium-weight CH-53G/GS/GA/GE transport helicopters that has been used by the German armed forces for 50 years is now seriously outdated. Accordingly, the helicopter is struggling with high obsolescence; of all the Air Force's flying weapon systems, the CH-53 currently has the lowest operational readiness. In 2019, an average of just 22 helicopters were available out of a total inventory of 71 CH-53s. Bundeswehr-Journal 2019: Von 71 CH-53 momentan nur 22 Maschinen einsatzbereit, 14 Jul 2019, in: https://bit.ly/3osaqe8 [6 Dec 2021].

18 Littoral warfare, distinct from open sea operations, refers to naval operations in shallow waters, often near the coast. Littoral combat is particularly significant in the Baltic due to its geography, with its numerous straits and islands, and shallow waters. This has an impact on the tactics and means employed, such as the use of sea mines, mine counter-measures, or the use of corvettes and other small warships.

Source: © Benoît Tessier, Reuters.

"It Is a Geopolitical Urgency that the Sahel Be Made a Paradise"

Lessons from Afghanistan for German Policy-making in the Sahel

Stefan Friedrich

Will Mali become the new Afghanistan?[1] If it were up to Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of the al-Qaeda group in the Sahel, that is precisely what we could expect. Even before Kabul had fallen completely to the Taliban, he congratulated his Afghani brothers-in-arms with the words "We are winning. Our hour has come."[2] But even in political Berlin, many wonder what the West's hasty withdrawal from Kabul means for its involvement in the Sahel. The context of this question: Now the Afghanistan mission has ended, the mission to Mali is by far the largest for the German Bundeswehr. But to what extent can we even compare the two missions? And, despite their pronounced differences, are there lessons from Afghanistan that can be applied to Mali and the Sahel – for the Bundeswehr mission and for the direction of German (development) policy-making? A central difference between Afghanistan and the Sahel is clear to see: Western failure in the Sahel would have a far more direct impact on Germany and Europe than its failure in Afghanistan.

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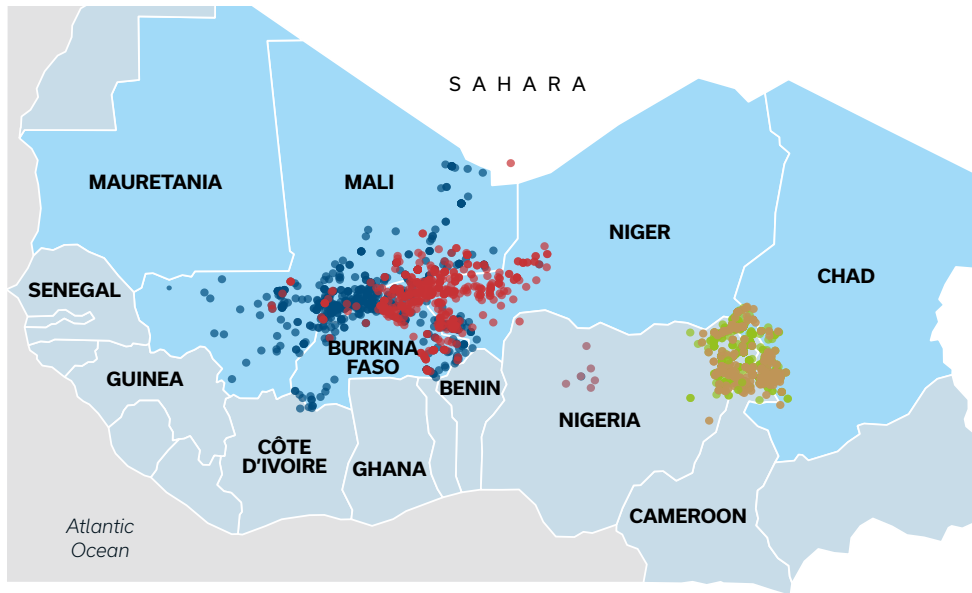### The Sahel Is Not Afghanistan, *but* – There Are Similarities and Differences

It is certainly important to note that Afghanistan and the Sahel are fundamentally different. Afghanistan has more or less fixed borders with its neighbours, whereas the Sahel region extends over several thousand kilometres from east to west and encompasses at least five countries: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. Some borders of these countries are fluid, and it was only as part of colonial occupation that they were established in their present form. But geographical space is not the only aspect differentiating Afghanistan from the Sahel. Differences in the type of conflict occurring there could hardly be greater. In Afghanistan, the Taliban constitute a dominant group that, even after almost 20 years since having been driven from power, has remained an effective player in the region. There is no such group in the Sahel. There are only solitary, locally (sometimes regionally) active terrorist groups without any overarching ideological, ethnic, or other form of cohesion. This has given rise to an all-against-all situation. Not counting France's relatively good relationships with some of the elites in the region, there are no proxies for foreign powers in the Sahel like those that could be observed in Afghanistan (for the Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s and the Western powers after 9/11, for instance).

Another significant element from a Western perspective is the fact that there has been no export of terrorism from the Sahel thus far. Unlike Afghanistan, where the 9/11 attacks were planned and prepared, as far as we know not a single terrorist attack in the West originated from the Sahel region. The societies there are familiar with conflict, but – and this is key – none of them (with the possible exception of Chad) are entangled in wars that have gone on for decades.

Despite all the differences, the two regions share common features. For instance, jihadist groups

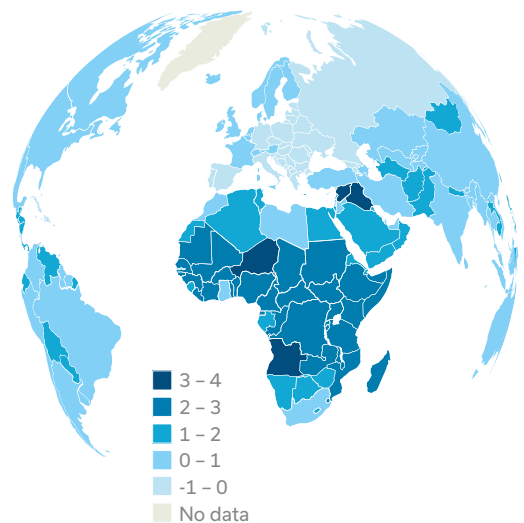**Fig. 1: Distribution of Jihadist Groups in the Sahel 2021**

● Ansaru ● Boko Haram ● AQUIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) ● ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) ● ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province) Source: Own illustration based on German Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb) 2021: Hauptaktionsgebiete islamistischer Terrorgruppen und ihrer Verbündeten 2020, used in: Dickow, Helga 2021: Sahel: Implikationen und Folgen der Corona-Krise, bpb, 21 Jan 2021, in: https://bpb.de/325527 [5 Jan 2022], map: Natural Earth ®.

are active in both. IS and al-Qaeda are active in Afghanistan, while the Sahel sees activity by AQUIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), Boko Haram, ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), and ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province).

Demographic Growth and Weak States – An Explosive Combination?

Just like Afghanistan, many Sahel states suffer from a markedly dysfunctional statehood. Key attributes of a functioning state are almost non-existent there. Missing features include effective control of the state's national territory, functional administration, the provision of elementary state services not only in the capitals, but in remote areas (in some regions, such services, by contrast, are now provided by jihadist forces), a functioning, loyal military accepted by the population, assertive security forces, and many more. Serge Michailof, former Director of

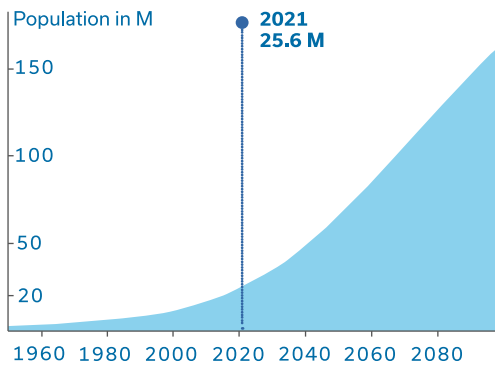**Fig. 2: Expected Demographic Development Worldwide, with a Focus on the Sahel, in Per Cent, 2025–2030**

3 – 4
2 – 3
1 – 2
0 – 1
-1 – 0
No data

Source: Own illustration based on UN 2019: World Population Prospects 2019, in: https://population.un.org/wpp/Maps [1 Dec 2021], map: Natural Earth ®.

the World Bank and of the French Development Agency (Agence Française de Développement, AFD) and a proven expert on Afghanistan and West Africa, sees this absence of governmental authority (*institutions régaliennes*) as a central problem for all of these countries and for the efficiency of Western development aid. More on this later.

Another very comparable element is the demographic development in these two regions. Until the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan had one of the highest birth rates worldwide. The average woman bore more than seven children (2000 fertility rate: 7.48 children per woman). In the years thereafter, this number fell dramatically, reaching the – still high – rate of 4.32 in 2019. The birth rate in the Sahel is also very high. It is 5.80 per woman in Chad, 5.92 in Mali, and 6.95 in Niger (the highest in the world).[3]

As figure 2 shows, the entire Sahel belt exhibits the fastest population growth in the world. Overall, it is estimated that 80 per cent of the region's population is still under 30 years old. The UN expects Niger, which is currently home to more than 25 million people, to double its population by 2041 and exceed the threshold of 50 million.

Fig. 3: Expected Population Growth in Niger up to the Year 2100

Source: Own illustration based on World Population Review 2021: Niger Population 2021 (Live), n. 4.
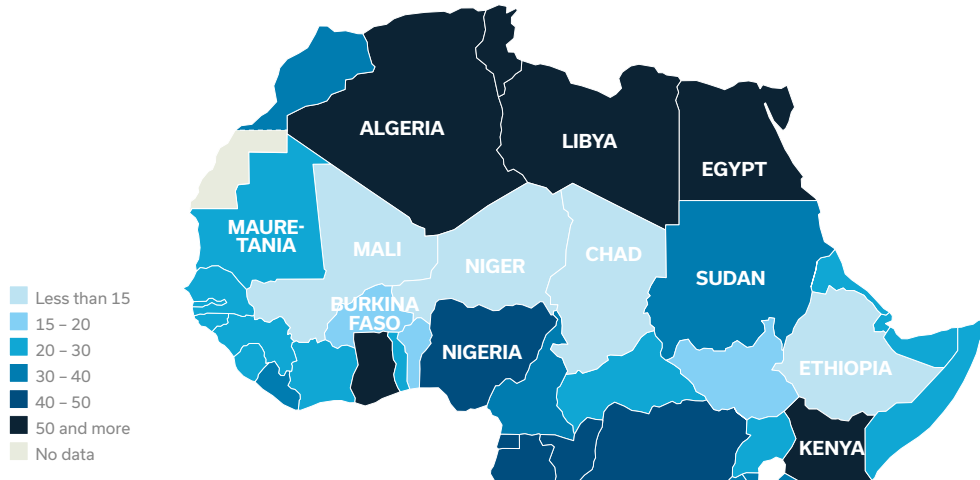
Such population growth naturally exacerbates the already prevailing great social and economic challenges, not least because these countries' economic development is already stagnating at a very low level. For instance, they are largely agricultural or dependent on raw materials exports. There has been no economic diversification, and experts see little hope that large-scale industrialisation or a powerful service industry can be initiated in the region. We can therefore already expect (and much more so in the future) that entire generations of young people will grow up without proper education or adequate life prospects. Especially with respect to schooling, the outlook for Sahel countries is particularly bleak.

This rapid population growth contrasts with very modest growth in each of the Sahel countries' economies. While all of them have natural resources to fall back on – there is gold in Mali, precious stones and metals in Niger, and oil in Chad – economic growth over the last few years was modest nevertheless. In Chad, it was 3.2 per cent in 2019, but only 0.8 per cent in 2020 (part of this was due to COVID-19 restrictions); in Niger, 5.9 per cent in 2019 and 3.6 per cent in 2020; and in Mali around 4 per cent for the last few years.[4] In virtually all of the region's countries, this meant that population growth continuously exceeded the economic growth rates. The countries are in a poverty trap.

Radicalisation Processes and Migration Flows

The comparison between Afghanistan and the situation in the Sahel has repeatedly been made over the last ten years, and there has been no lack of warnings. For instance, the Algerian daily newspaper El Watan printed the following back in September 2010 (even before French troops were sent to stabilise Mali): "It is clear that the situation in the Sahel is dangerous, even explosive. It demands an urgent reaction by the states in the region before others make a second Afghanistan out of it."[5] And in 2015, Serge Michailof, who has already been mentioned, wrote, the "situation in the northern Sahel is very reminiscent of Afghanistan at the beginning of the 2000s, when agricultural collapse,

Fig. 4: Population with at Least Secondary Education in the Sahel Region 2015 in Per Cent

Source: Own illustration based on Kaps, Alisa / Schewe, Ann-Kathrin / Klingholz, Reiner 2019: Afrikas demografische Vorreiter. Wie sinkende Kinderzahlen Entwicklung beschleunigen, Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung, Jun 2019, p. 12, in: https://bit.ly/3JLI5JN [5 Jan 2022], map: Natural Earth ⊚.

state corruption, and the absence of the state in rural areas paved the way for the Taliban".[6]

The fact that the September 11 attackers were trained in Afghanistan shows that such developments can present distant societies with very concrete threats. Are we facing a similar threat from the Sahel?
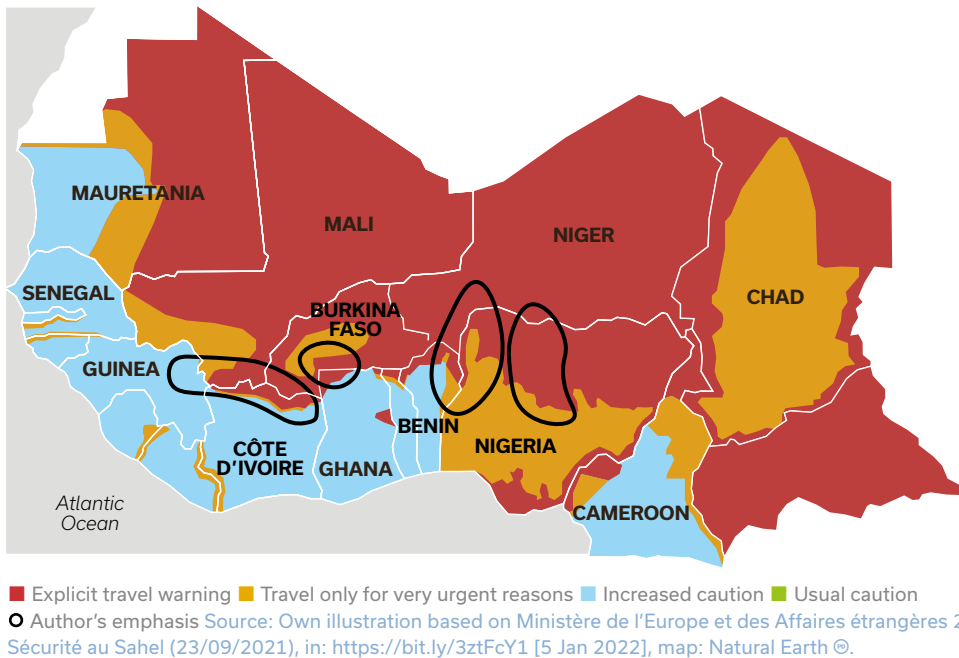
The lack of prospects of an entire generation in the Sahel region could certainly make many young men – and also women – more receptive to radical ideologies. But even without a direct terrorist threat, which would hit the countries themselves at first, the enormous population growth will be a huge challenge for the neighbouring continent of Europe in the mid- to long term. The hopelessness in their home countries combined with the hope for a better life somewhere in Europe communicated via social media is already generating massive migration movements from the Sahel region across North Africa towards Europe. The pressure will further increase in the future, especially when anchors of stability to the north (the Maghreb) and south of the Sahara (countries on the Gulf of Guinea) come under pressure from developments in the

Sahel region. Erol Yayboke of the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) summarised the problem as follows:

"Multiple overlapping factors drive irregular migration through the Sahel. Mostly young and male, the majority of migrants cite economic reasons as primary considerations [...]. However, this livelihood insecurity is linked to other destabilizing factors. Governance is absent or poor. Basic services in remote areas are scarce. Trust in government is low, and thus violence is common. Extremist organizations have unleashed an unprecedented wave of attacks on civilians in recent years. Climate change compounds this insecurity. Deadly conflicts over resources have increased and now account for more deaths than extremism. Temperatures in the Sahel are rising 1.5 times faster than in the rest of the world, resulting in alternating extremes of droughts and floods and in turn displacing entire communities and reducing agricultural yields. Add to the mix insufficient information about the dangers of migration and significant pull factors – including regular access to social media and stylized visions of life in Europe – and it is no surprise that people embark on perilous journeys."[7]

Fig. 5: Security Situation in the Sahel 2021

■ Explicit travel warning ■ Travel only for very urgent reasons ■ Increased caution ■ Usual caution
○ Author's emphasis Source: Own illustration based on Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021: Sécurité au Sahel (23/09/2021), in: https://bit.ly/3ztFcY1 [5 Jan 2022], map: Natural Earth ®.

All these factors and particularly the combination of a precarious security situation, dynamic demographic development, and a poor economic outlook create a highly explosive mixture – for the society in the Sahel, but also potentially for the world beyond.

*Growing Political Instability
despite International Interventions*

These developments lead to a greater measure of political instability, too. For instance, in the last 15 months alone, Mali has witnessed two military coups, and the long-time president of Chad was killed by shots fired from within his inner circle (the details remain unclear, and government has been assumed by a military council under the leadership of the late president's adopted son, Mahamat Idriss Déby). New elections are to be held in each country only after a transitional phase of 18 months – a timetable that has now been extended to five years by the Malian transitional government. And on 24 January 2022, rumours became reality, since there was another coup in Burkina Faso following

massive protests against the government, which has proven unable to improve the country's fragile security situation. Like Afghanistan in the 2010s, the Sahel region experiences a continuously deteriorating security situation despite the deployment of a wide range of military stabilisation missions and extensive engagement in the area of development cooperation.

French troops were the first on the ground with Operation Serval (2013 to 2014), followed by Operation Barkhane (2014 to 2021), involving up to 5,100 French soldiers. After terminating Barkhane, the fight against terrorism will be continued under the multinational Task Force Takuba, which was formed in March 2020. The Bundeswehr has been deployed to the Sahel since 2013. In Mali, German troops were involved in the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) and in the UN-led MINUSMA stabilisation mission.[8] While the EUTM Mali mandate encompasses all five Sahel countries, where the G5[9] Sahel Joint Force, among others, receives military advice and training, the UN peacekeeping mission is limited to Mali and Niger. In Niger, the

Bundeswehr is also involved in training special forces.[10] Despite all these efforts, the security situation has become increasingly tense for each of the past eight years. This is illustrated by French Foreign Ministry maps of the Sahel region: they include more and more areas with explicit warnings that they should be avoided (*formellement déconseillé*). In the period between August 2020 and June 2021 alone, additional areas on the south flank of the Sahel region were designated as dark red. Travellers are therefore explicitly advised against areas in northern Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Nigeria (see fig. 5). Particularly with respect to Burkina Faso, the French maps strikingly demonstrate how much the situation has deteriorated in this central Sahel country over recent years (see fig. 6).
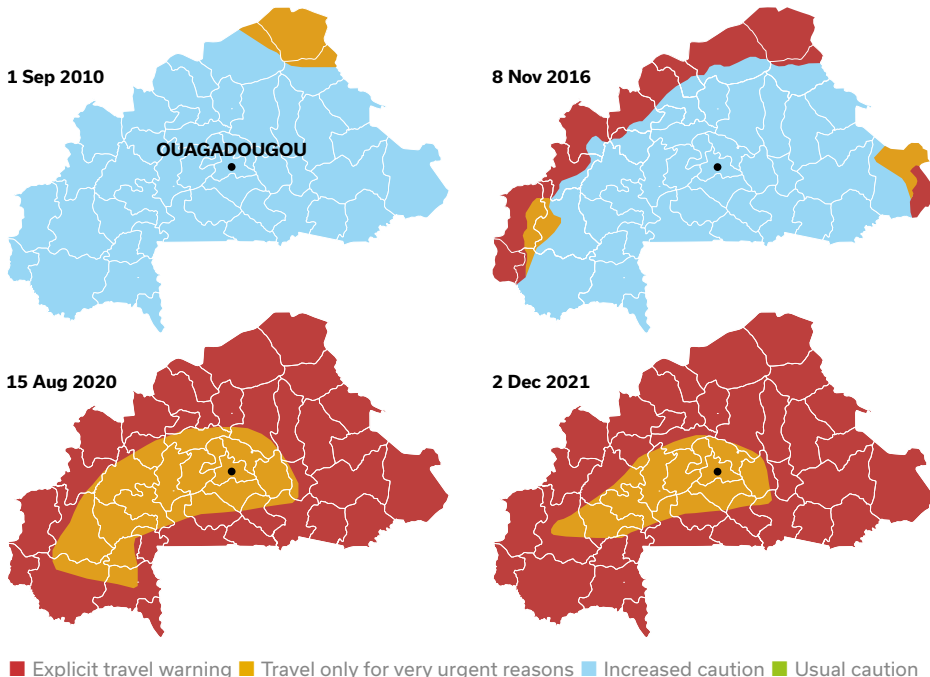
The differences between Afghanistan and the Sahel region, for which more examples could be cited, are certainly significant. But there are also comparable areas. Here, it is important to emphasise that there can be no simple transfer of lessons from Afghanistan to the Sahel; nevertheless, any policy considerations in the Sahel region should take account of experience gained from the failure of the Afghanistan mission with attention to the very specific conditions prevailing in the Sahel region.

Central Challenges in the Sahel Region

The Sahel region faces a number of challenges – from economic and political to demographic and security-related. A distinction should be made between challenges arising from the Sahel itself, its location, its traditions, its culture, and so forth, on the one hand, and those emanating from eight years of international efforts to help stabilise the region and defend it against terrorist threats, on the other.

Fig. 6: Deterioration of the Security Situation in Burkina Faso 2010–2021

🟥 Explicit travel warning 🟧 Travel only for very urgent reasons 🟦 Increased caution 🟩 Usual caution
Source: Own illustration based on Courbois, Christian 2021: Update of the French MEAE's vigilance map, concerning Burkina Faso from September 1, 2010 to November 30, 2021, via Twitter, 30 Nov 2021, in: https://bit.ly/3pUIDEZ [5 Jan 2022], based on information from the Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, in: https://bit.ly/32PvpQc [5 Jan 2022], maps: Natural Earth ☺.

We will not review all of the above-mentioned challenges. Yet there are challenges that have still not been explicitly addressed due to a focus on the comparison with Afghanistan and that must not be neglected. Time and again, experts on the region refer to fundamental conflicts that were present even before the spread of jihadist forces in the region, such as the fact that Mali's territory encompasses two completely different cultural areas: the north, which tends to be Arab in culture, and the south, which is more of a "black African" culture. The founding of Mali and the establishment of its capital in Bamako

(in the south) made the southern part of the country dominant, something that is difficult for northern groups such as the Tuareg to accept. Many observers think that one reason for the rebellion in the north of Mali in 2012, which was put down only with French intervention, is precisely this north-south polarisation, and not so much a religiously motivated conflict. Religious elements first came into play when the Tuareg allied themselves with jihadist elements, which then became dominant.

In any case, jihadists are becoming more and more adept at capitalising on existing ethnic conflicts, such as the land usage conflict between

Forced migration: A woman who fled from armed militants in her home region is seen in a camp for internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso. Source: © Zohra Bensemra, Reuters.

Fulani shepherds and Dogon farmers. Given the rapid population growth already mentioned, a conflict between the younger generation and the old elites is manifesting itself in various countries. Social conflicts, too, – between urban and rural, traditional and modern, and, of course, rich and poor – can be observed. All these conflicts overlap, which makes them extremely difficult to resolve. The difficult labour market situation has already been addressed. Then there are the challenges arising from the ways in which advancing climate change is affecting societies. Progressive desertification of many areas in the Sahel region can already be observed and is reducing crop yields. This means that the most important economic sector, agriculture, is also coming under severe pressure – even as population continues to grow.

Europe does not have the option of simply abandoning the region entirely.

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Challenges Due to International Involvement

One of the contradictions of all international interventions is that they themselves may become obstacles for conflict resolution. Several observers have noted that the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) process initiated during the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement primarily became a business model for local players in the region. Some observers go as far as to say that many players in Mali have no interest whatsoever in bringing the DDR process to a close, since that would dry up sources of income.

And as long as international partners assume responsibility for tasks that the state should rightfully carry out, and do so free of charge, local partners have little interest in assuming it themselves. Another problem particularly evident in Mali is that the number of aid organisations and international donors has grown so great that they are impossible to keep track of;

there is little if any coordination of support, and they are impeding each other's efforts to expend funds. There is also competition for the best local talent, ultimately impairing the establishment of local structures (see below).

Policy Recommendations – A Lot Is Being Done, but Are We Doing Enough, and Are We Doing the Right Things?

There are definitely no easy solutions for the Sahel. However, it is important to remember that Europe in particular does not have the option of simply abandoning the region entirely. If we were to do that, the problems there would, sooner or later, reach Europe in the form of destabilisation of states in our immediate vicinity in North Africa, the destabilisation of anchors of stability on the south and west flanks of the Sahara (Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, etc.), increasing migratory pressure towards Europe, and many more. Inaction is not an option, as the facts clearly show. But what should be done? And what can actually be done?

First, it is important to note something very positive: a very great deal is already being done. The international community is involved in the region in a variety of ways – militarily, economically, politically, and with humanitarian and civil society efforts. Many billions of dollars and euros are being invested to make the situation on the ground safer and advance development in the region's countries. Germany is especially active in those countries defined as anchors of stability, and which are being funded as part of so-called reform partnerships.

The discussion above shows that the security situation in the region continues to deteriorate despite international involvement; meanwhile, three of the five countries in the Sahel are governed by putschists, and economic growth lags far behind demographic growth.

Below are five areas in which the international community could improve its approaches to and impact on developments in the region.[11]

1. Military Involvement: Moving Away from Pure Counterterrorism and towards Providing Secure Living Space for Ever-larger Parts of the Population

Combatting terrorist groups must not be the sole objective of military intervention. The elimination of terrorist groups is a positive development – and there may be scenarios in which this is the only thing that external players are able to achieve. But terrorist groups come and go, especially in the Sahel. What will be decisive for the region is whether there are secure places for the population to live. Creating such spaces can start small and would ideally increase incrementally to ever-greater areas of the Sahel. Military involvement must have a positive effect on the population's sense of security.

It is paramount here that the local military organisations in particular achieve these positive effects. It will be indispensable that local armies be held to their responsibility and that they fulfil this role. International troops should be used primarily for training and advice. The critical security work must be done by native military organisations, in order that the feeling of security is sustainable and not dependent on the presence of international troops.

Many observers call for local military organisations to be advised by small teams with flexible missions. While the EUTM "tanker" does excellent work, it often appears too inflexible for local needs and requires an excessive number of troops for its own security. This leads to costs that are disproportionate to utility. The personnel used for the training in question should also be reconsidered. Various observers complain, for example, that quick trainer rotation (usually every six months) and the fact that many of them have insufficient intercultural expertise

Sustainable security: International troops should be used primarily for training and advice and not become indispensable in the long run. Source: © Emilie Regnier, Reuters.

tends to impede the creation of robust structures and a relationship of trust between trainers and local forces. Nor does this "tanker" make it particularly credible that misconduct by political leaders from partner countries could actually be sanctioned. The EUTM mission and associated structures within the EU and the partner countries are simply too slow and complicated. The political will of the partner countries is decisive here. The fact that the governments in Mali, and possibly Burkina Faso, have brought or are planning to bring the paramilitary Wagner Group from Russia into the country as a security contractor should also be interpreted as a sign of dissatisfaction with support provided by the international community.[12]

At the same time, military presence alone cannot achieve long-term stabilisation successes; it must be coupled with measures targeting the underlying challenges.[13]

2. Involvement in Establishing State Structures: Citizens Must Feel that the State Is Performing Its Functions

The problems in the Sahel will definitely not be solved by purely military means. Ultimately, the support respectively the establishment of the states will be decisive. This will require greatly increased effort on the part of international donors to all countries of the Sahel so that the state can prove – also to its population – that it is functional. The aforementioned Michailof views this as one of the biggest failures of the Afghanistan mission: "The fatal error was relying too much on the power of Western forces, failing to establish a national army and police forces early enough, and neglecting the reconstruction of functional local governments."[14]

It is important that it really be local institutions that ensure services (health, social services, education, etc.) for the population. Because of the important role local security actors may play in this context, these should be integrated into international donors' development efforts. However, donors are very often (no doubt owing to negative experiences in other contexts) far

too hesitant and restrained to do more.[15] In this context, it is also important to proactively tackle the problem of the "crisis economy". Approaches involving international players poaching the best talent in the country for work on their own projects are not expedient. As long as international players pay many times the salary that can be earned in local administration, there will always be a trend towards bleeding national administrations dry. Ultimately functional, effective administrations can be organised only if this brain drain to international organisation structures stops. Michailof speaks of parallel administrations in which salaries are sometimes five to even 40 times higher than in normal public administrations.[16]

Unabated population growth in the region poses a challenge to the future not only for the affected countries themselves, but also for neighbouring countries.
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There is a need for a binding agreement among all international organisations, including the UN, EU, and others, that establishes a cap on salaries. This must be based on the salary structure in local administrations. If this is not done, the development of state structures is doomed to failure in the long run. Besides salary, it is of course critical that administrative positions be filled based on qualifications and merit.

3. Additional Investment in Agriculture

It has already been mentioned that, in addition to the exploitation of certain natural resources, agriculture forms the backbone of economic development in Sahel countries. Against this background and the need to create as many jobs as possible, greater consideration should be given to promoting agriculture. A comprehensive, decentralised irrigation programme with massive support from the international

community should play a vital role here.[17] Also for this, a secure environment (see point 1) is critical.

In addition to these activities, massive support should also be lent to large cross-regional projects aimed at erecting a Great Green Wall in the Sahel. Here, Germany, apparently unlike the French AFD, is involved only as part of EU funding. This is despite the fact that the project's sponsoring organisation, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, is based in Bonn.[18]

4. Greater Focus on Demography and Greater Modesty in Civil Society Goals

Given the extremely rapid population growth, it is imperative for the international community to pay more attention to this challenge, even though international donors are loathe to do so. But the Sahel countries are trapped by the current population growth to an especially great degree and have no alternative "if they want to avoid the Malthusian collapse that threatens".[19] Unabated population growth in the region poses a challenge to the future not only for affected countries themselves, but also, as indicated above, for neighbouring countries.

And the discussion of whether, in light of enormous problems facing the region, the international community should insist on compliance with all desirable principles from the outset, must remain open. The establishment of structures that are formally democratic but not so much in practice, might not be desirable either. Initially, the priority should be to establish structures with which the state can demonstrate its ability to act. Intermediate solutions should be allowed, and they do not signal that the goal of democratic development has been abandoned.

5. Expanding the Field of View: Supporting the Central Sahel and the Anchors of Stability around It

In public discussions in Germany, the mission to the Sahel region is often referred to as the "Mali mission". Although the majority of German military forces in the region are currently deployed to Mali, our focus should not be restricted to that country.[20] French Foreign Ministry maps showing the security situation in West Africa are not the only evidence that evermore territory is becoming insecure, even in areas of countries that had previously been considered anchors of stability in the region. One example is the spread of insecurity south from Burkina Faso across the borders of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin.[21]

Currently we may still be in a position to provide these countries with greater economic, political, and, if necessary, military support in order to slow the creeping process of heightened security threats and possibly even roll them back.

Conclusion

Shortly after the fall of Kabul and the withdrawal of the last NATO soldiers, some voices accused the West of throwing in the towel too soon. Even the former Co-Chairman of the green Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung believes that the West often lacks strategic patience. And "liberal democracies have trouble maintaining military missions over long periods and weathering setbacks".[22]

The die has been cast in Afghanistan, and the West has withdrawn. However, in the Sahel the key now is not to retreat, but to set the right course that will allow the region to develop sufficient strength to stand on its own two feet. It does not seem to be too late for this. But we will need perseverance, the right strategy, and, of course, the support of the population, both here and there. It will not be easy, nor does it have to go according to René Billaz, who called it a "geopolitical urgency that the Sahel be made a paradise".[23] It will be enough if the countries in the region could realise more of their potential – to their own advantage, but also to that of their neighbours to the north and south.

– translated from German –

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1 The editorial deadline for this article was 27 January 2022.

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8 United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali.

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11 Here I would like to thank a number of colleagues and experts with whom I was able to have a series of conversations about the concerns of this article. They include Thomas Schiller and Florian Karner (both of whom used to work for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung) and Oberstleutnant Christoph Krammer of German Federal Armed Forces Operations Command (Einsatzführungskommando der Bundeswehr). All responsibility for assessments and recommendations expressed here lies with me.

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15 Ibid., p. 288.

16 Ibid., p. 257.

17 Ibid., p. 246.

18 Great Green Wall Project, in: https://greatgreenwall.org [4 Jan 2022].

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In Retreat? Western Security Policy after Afghanistan

Intervention without a Goal

The Case of Libya and Its Consequences

Lukas Kupfernagel / Thomas Volk

Almost overnight, the onset of the "Arab Spring" jolted the MENA region out of a collective deep sleep. In Libya, the dream of freedom turned into a nightmare that shocked both the country, and its neighbours in Europe, the Sahel, and North Africa. After two civil wars, a proxy war, but also some encouraging recent developments, it is time to ask: What went wrong in the past ten years? What went right? And which lessons can be learned?

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Ten years after the start of the so-called Arab Spring, Libya is still in a state of upheaval, but recent developments offer cautious hope that the situation is stabilising. Like many other countries in the region, Libya was caught off guard by the strength of public protest in 2011, leading to the toppling of long-time ruler Muammar al-Gaddafi and his regime. The years that followed remained tumultuous, and Libya became the site of a geopolitical proxy war between foreign powers. However, since the Berlin Process on Libya, convened by German Chancellor Angela Merkel under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) in January 2020, the situation in the North African country has been steadily stabilising. Moreover, the ceasefire between the warring factions has held since 23 October 2020, although UN estimates suggest that up to 20,000 foreign mercenaries remain stationed in Libya. More recently, the Second Berlin Conference on Libya in summer 2021 pushed for the withdrawal of all foreign mercenaries and troops, especially from Sudan, Chad, Turkey, and Russia, but this is not set to happen before 2023.

The political dialogue initiated in November 2020 by the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) pushed forward to initiate presidential and parliamentary elections that were supposed to be held on 24 December 2021, Libya's 70th Independence Day. While these elections had to be postponed to June 2022, the armistice is still in place. This was also thanks to the personal commitment of UN Special Representative for Libya, former US diplomat Stephanie Williams, who served until February 2021, and her predecessor Ghassan Salamé. Williams took over the Libya dossier once again in December 2021, this time as Special Adviser on Libya to the UN Secretary-General. In addition to this, in March 2021, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) elected a transitional Government of National Unity (GNU) to restore the country's institutional unity. The oil-rich Mediterranean country is still in a politically fragile situation, and violent clashes between opposing ethnic groups, militias, or tribal groups could flare up again at any time. However, despite this, Libya is on a path to consolidation that would probably not have been possible without the strong international support for a political solution that has been evident since 2020. It is worth looking back at the last decade of conflict in Libya in order to understand why the Berlin Process was needed to resolve deadlocks, and to what extent the escalating violence was also a legacy of the NATO-led international coalition that toppled Gaddafi but lacked a long-term strategy for the country.

The unforeseen protest movements that began in Tunisia in December 2010, and in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria in January 2011, resulted in the overthrow of long-time rulers Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Husni Mubarak. They formed the trigger for the first protests against the oppressive regime of the eccentric despot Muammar al-Gaddafi, which kicked off in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi on 15 February 2011. This was four days after the fall of Mubarak in neighbouring Egypt. As in Tunisia and Egypt, the protests in

Libya quickly triggered a chain reaction, prompting thousands of citizens to take to the streets in Benghazi, Bayda, Derna, and Zitan. The people expressed their discontent and despair about the decades of humiliation they had suffered under Gaddafi and rose up against the regime.

Initially local and decentralised, the demonstrations attracted more and more support, partly due to the mobilising power of social media, and within a few days the protests had also reached the capital, Tripoli, in the west of the country. The security apparatus of this authoritarian state responded in brutal fashion, enraging the protesters still further and spurring them on to stronger action. The response of Gaddafi's forces often resulted in fatalities,

adding fuel to the fire of rebellion.[1] Within a few weeks, the initially peaceful protests had turned into a bloody civil war in which Gaddafi's troops attacked their opponents from the sea and, with the help of mercenaries from neighbouring countries to the south, also by ground and air. The UN Security Council passed a unanimous resolution, which included travel bans for Gaddafi and his closest relatives, and the freezing of their assets.[2] Even this (it seems) left him unmoved. So, at first, there was little surprise at the increasingly brutal response of the Libyan armed forces and Gaddafi's martial rhetoric. As late as March, he addressed the citizens of Benghazi with the following words: "They [Gaddafi's opponents] are finished, they are wiped out. From tomorrow you will only find

A French fighter jet returns from a mission over Libya: Paris was the key driver in the 2011 intervention in the North African state. Source: © Benoit Tessier, Reuters.

our people. You all go out and cleanse the city of Benghazi. [...] We will track them down, and search for them, alley by alley, road by road."[3] The fact that this was not mere rhetoric was felt in the city when Gaddafi's troops marched in with tanks and ground troops just one day after the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973,[4] which, among other things, called for the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya. Less than 24 hours later, the French air force opened fire on the Libyan troops, followed shortly afterwards by the US navy. The international intervention force was completed by several NATO members, and the two Gulf states Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which would continue to play a leading role in later conflicts in Libya.

Under President Nicolas Sarkozy, France played a key role in initiating UN Resolution 1973. According to a 2016 report on the Libya mission by the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Sarkozy's objectives in the Libya intervention were as follows: to increase French influence in North Africa; to reassert the French military's position in the world; and to secure more significant access to Libya's oil production. The report also mentions Sarkozy's domestic political motivations, with an April 2011 poll showing that over 60 per cent of the French public approved of military intervention in Libya.[5] Moreover, in the run-up to the 2012 presidential elections, Sarkozy was thus able to portray himself as a strong man, determined to ensure stability in Europe's southern neighbourhood.

This 2016 report by the UK Parliament delivers a harsh verdict on the decision of David Cameron's government to go along with the French narrative on intervention in Libya without closely monitoring what was actually happening on the ground. According to the report, the initial narrative of an urgent Responsibility to Protect quickly turned into an "opportunist policy of regime change" without a consistent strategy for a post-Gaddafi era.[6] In a statement to the House in March 2011, Cameron himself referred to the need for military intervention against Gaddafi, saying that the Libyan leader had ignored previous UN resolutions, and that the Libyan people were calling for an international response.[7] Therefore, he said, "the time for red lines, threats, last chances is over"; "tough action" was needed.

In retrospect, Germany's position at the UN Security Council proved to be correct.
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Consideration should also be given to Turkey's role, particularly in light of the fact that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was Prime Minister at the time, boasted of his strong contacts with Gaddafi. Moreover, as a NATO member, the country was manoeuvred into a particularly delicate position in the conflict. Erdoğan, who was seeking to win a renewed majority for his Islamic conservative AKP in the parliamentary elections in the summer of 2011, faced domestic sentiment critical of a French-led intervention in Libya. France's standing in Turkey was already low at that time, fuelled by President Sarkozy's repeated opposition to Turkey's EU accession. As a result, Erdoğan and his then foreign minister Davutoğlu initially voiced strong criticism of the Libya intervention. In addition to domestic political reasons, the fact that there were at least 30,000 Turkish workers in Libya, as well as Turkey's traditionally close economic ties with the country, may also have contributed to this attitude. However, after the mission command was transferred to NATO, Turkey, as a NATO member, showed willingness to participate actively in the mission. Subsequently, following a parliamentary decision in March 2011, the Turkish military provided five frigates and a submarine to monitor the UN arms embargo against Libya. In retrospect, this deployment is not without a certain irony, especially since Turkey itself has been repeatedly accused of breaking the UN embargo and supplying the internationally recognised interim government (GNA) with arms since 2019.

Germany decided to abstain at the UN Security Council – thus, for the first time, adopting a position that diverged from that of other NATO

and EU states. Nevertheless, in retrospect it can be seen that the German position proved to be correct. Although, for the Chancellor's Office, it was important from the outset that the resolution should not fail because of Germany's abstention, significant concerns were expressed about the practical consequences of a deployment. The majority of the German public was opposed to participating in a military intervention in Libya. One of the German government's key arguments was that a large EU country like Germany would have to be involved in military action if it voted for the resolution. But it was not keen to do this in light of the complicated situation in Libya, and the incalculable consequences. However, Germany supported the political objectives of the UN resolution, and its loyalty to the alliance within NATO was never questioned.

The rosy future that NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen portrayed for Libyans initially failed to materialise after 2011.
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In the autumn of 2011, after nearly 10,000[8] air strikes, Gaddafi was history – lynched by rebels after an air strike on his convoy near his hometown of Sirte, he was buried in the desert in a manner unworthy of a self-declared king of Africa. With the fall of Gaddafi, NATO's Unified Protector mission ended on 31 October 2011, and just one day later, NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen appeared before the cameras to congratulate the Libyans on writing "a new chapter in the history of Libya"[9] based on "freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law and reconciliation".[10] He also affirmed that the intervention marked the end of "a successful chapter in NATO's history".[11] But the rosy future that he portrayed in his speeches to Libyans in Tripoli, Benghazi, and Sirte failed to materialise over the following years. The National Transitional Council (NTC), which emerged in July 2011 from the Libya Contact Group founded in London, prepared for the first free elections for

2012. They were indeed held, but these incipient attempts at democracy after more than four decades of authoritarian rule were unable to save the country from violent conflict and division. So, what lessons can be learned from the 2011 military intervention?

NATO Success or International Failure?

Relatively quickly, NATO deemed the intervention in Libya to be a success, and at the outset it looked as if Operation Unified Protector would be a prime example of a successful Responsibility to Protect (R2P) mission. The three main pillars of R2P encompass the responsibility of states to protect their population from war crimes; underscore the willingness of the international community to assist each other in their protection responsibilities; and highlight their readiness to intervene in a timely manner in specific cases. In the Libyan example, the established no-fly zone was respected, sanctions were quickly implemented, and the Gaddafi regime was ultimately overthrown. It was also possible to install a government in the form of the National Transitional Council, which was to run the country until free elections could be held to ensure its transformation. Despite the fact that a monitoring and assistance unit was set up in September 2011 with the UN mission UNSMIL, the clear goal was a transition that should mainly be achieved by the Libyans themselves. On paper, the idea of a democratic transition in the hands of the Libyans – especially after the disastrous 2003 US intervention in Iraq – sounded like a promising strategy. So what were the failures that led outgoing US President Barack Obama to call the US involvement in the Libya intervention the "worst mistake" of his presidency in an interview in 2016,[12] and even to admit that the country had ended up spiralling into chaos in the aftermath of the intervention?[13]

The Scent of Revolution vs. the Original Mission

In attempting to answer this question, it is necessary to point to the complexity of Libya's social and geographic situation. The country

is shaped by three influential regions, all of which play (or have played) a key role in the social and military conflicts of the recent past. While Libya's western region, Tripolitania, has traditionally sought close economic ties with its neighbours north of the Mediterranean, the tribes and families of Libya's east, Cyrenaica, have always had close ties with Egypt. Even before the civil wars, the desert areas of southern Fezzan, with their porous borders with neighbouring Algeria, Chad, and Niger, were retreats for non-Arab tribes living semi-nomadic lives, which were ruthlessly persecuted under Gaddafi's rule.

Libya's territorial and social complexity plays a significant role in the country's national identity. A clear social contract was never drawn up, but at best was established by Gaddafi in his philosophy of *Jamahiriya* (state of the masses), set out in his Green Book[14] and portrayed as Libyan social and state doctrine. Even before independence, there was a degree of enmity between western Tripolitania, with its ideal of a republic, and eastern Cyrenaica, characterised by the Senussi dynasty and King Idris. After Gaddafi's coup in 1969 and the creation of his *Jamahiriya*, domestic and international public opinion focused on Gaddafi and his confidants, who

Controversial interpretation: On 17 March 2011, with the vote on resolution 1973, the UN Security Council authorised the use of military means to protect civilians in Libya. Germany and other states abstained. In the following months, however, the intervening international coalition also supported the Libyan rebels in overthrowing Muammar al-Gaddafi. Source: © Jessica Rinaldi, Reuters.

were composed of disadvantaged families from rural regions.[15] In fact, the publicly proclaimed grassroots democracy was a vehicle to build loyalties and gain total control over an almost uncontrollable country – creating a deceptive peace for many years. Even though the Green Book represented the official social contract, this collection of writings was unable to replace the tribal structures that had evolved over centuries and which, from then on, acted in a more informal manner. *Jamahiriya* was the basis for the state system, conceived by Gaddafi himself, but it did not promise a common identity. The debate about identity politics, about whether the country can be described as Muslim or Arab, continues to this day.

> **The fact that Gaddafi's opponents could offer little in the way of a common vision for Libya's future was overlooked.**
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This complex and multi-layered social structure in Libya was given insufficient consideration during the NATO intervention in 2011. All the official documents ignored the country's social fragmentation and viewed Libya as a functional entity. So it is hardly surprising that some actors in the alliance were no longer merely concerned with the original goal of the Unified Protector mission – namely preventing Gaddafi's troops massacring the Libyan people – but also hoped the momentum of the "Arab Spring" would accelerate regime change through military means. However, they overlooked the fact that – apart from toppling the dictator – Gaddafi's opponents could offer little in the way of a common vision for the future of Libya, and failed to enter into dialogue with one another. Unlike most revolutions, there was no charismatic leader, no evolved opposition structures, or indeed any other institutions, such as a functional administration that could have filled the all-encompassing vacuum in the wake of an overthrow. Adequate concern

for the long-term political consequences for Libya was subordinated to the overriding goal of the core alliance in the NATO-led intervention: bringing about regime change in Libya by military means.

Ever since the beginning of the mission, the question of whether the explicit goal of the NATO intervention was regime change has been a controversial issue. Interestingly, as far back as the UN Security Council meeting of 17 March 2011, the British representative Sir Mark Lyall Grant stressed that the Gaddafi regime had lost all legitimacy, and the German UN Ambassador Peter Wittig also made it clear that it was a matter of sending a clear message that Gaddafi's time was over.[16] Such statements fuelled, and continue to fuel, speculation about whether regime change may have been a proactive goal of the alliance from the outset. However, one should not forget that the protests against the authoritarian Gaddafi regime during the "Arab Spring" after the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia covered the entire region and were initiated primarily by the local people themselves. For large swathes of the Libyan population, there was no question that the country's future could only be built without Gaddafi. Consequently, they were the ones who went on to kill the dictator.

If actors such as France had confined themselves to the original mandate, namely militarily protecting the civilian population from air strikes by Gaddafi's troops, this would not have been brought to such a resolute and speedy end. Without the direct and indirect support given to the rebels through reconnaissance and the bombing of enemy positions or arms deliveries, the insurgents would have struggled to push back Gaddafi's troops so quickly. On the other hand, a longer struggle might have led to the emergence of a leadership group or personality that could have symbolised a national awakening.

Opportunity Makes a Thief – or Leads to War

For all the ambiguities in the implementation of Resolution 1973 and the overarching objectives

of military intervention, one option was ruled out right from the outset: the deployment of ground troops. But it was also clear that the no-fly zone, the freezing of Gaddafi's assets and those of his closest associates, and coalition air strikes would still not suffice to bring down the dictator. That is why certain members of the coalition decided to airlift arms and munitions to the rebels in order to redress the military imbalance. Despite the tricky legalities of the situation, the coalition agreed in principle that light weapons and anti-tank missiles should be airlifted to various rebel units throughout the country. Coupled with the stockpiles of weapons and munitions stored by Gaddafi's forces in arsenals throughout the country, this made Libya a hub for circulating all kinds of weapons, especially after the fall of the ruler. According to estimates by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), after 2011 as many as 700,000 weapons from former Libyan army arsenals entered circulation and the open market.[17]

The responsibility for the Eldorado of the free arms trade on Libyan soil cannot be solely attributed to the international community, and to NATO in particular, because the arsenal of the Libyan armed forces under Gaddafi was already one of the largest in the whole of Africa.[18] However, the military mobilisation of all rebel factions, regardless of their ideological stance and potential hostility towards international actors, also contributed to the fact that a united front against Gaddafi turned into an anarchic civil war that once again sent the country spiralling into chaos. Thus, for all its tragedy, it is also significant that the terrorist attack conducted by the jihadist militia Ansar al-Sharia on the US embassy complex in Benghazi on 11 September 2012, which killed US Ambassador Christopher Stevens, involved the use of US weapons that had been sold by Qatar in 2011 with Washington's knowledge.[19]

By arming anti-Gaddafi units in a less than strategic manner, the states involved in the intervention tharted the fundamental arms embargo that had been unanimously adopted in Resolution 1970 in February 2011, albeit softened a few months later.[20] Coordinated and direct material support in compliance with all international requirements, such as the approval of supplies by the UN Sanctions Committee, might have prolonged the struggle between the regime and rebels, but could also have prevented side effects such as the unintentional arming of jihadist groups.

The overthrow of Gaddafi was necessary to protect the civilian population in Libya.
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Priorities in a Fragmented Land

The fall of a regime, especially after more than 40 years of autocracy, rarely runs smoothly. The many tasks that await a transitional government all have a degree of urgency: administrative reforms, constitutional amendments, organising elections, as well as reforming the security sector, including the question of how to deal with members of the security forces under the previous regime, and possibly also irregular troops. This was also the case in Libya. Although the overthrow of Gaddafi was necessary to protect the civilian population and offer them future prospects, a fragmented opposition with different ideas about Libya's future, combined with a dysfunctional state structure, contributed to the further destabilisation of the country.

In retrospect, due in part to social fragmentation, it was politically naïve to assume that a weak transitional government could lay the foundations for a resilient Libya based on democratic values. The fact that the UNSMIL mission prioritised support for the political transformation process, but let the security situation slip through its fingers could have been avoided if it had focused more strongly on security issues.[21] A UN stabilisation mission that aimed to ensure the physical security of the Libyan people could have played a key role in preventing further escalation in the North African country.

Friends Become Adversaries

In its early days, the original intervention in Libya was hailed as a success for multilateral cooperation in the face of a crisis.[22] Along with NATO members France and Britain, and initially also the US, non-members such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates quickly joined in, placing themselves at the service of the mission.

There were also a number of supporters who, for example, granted overflight rights for fighter aircraft, or allowed the use of their infrastructure on the ground. Thus Germany, which – like China and Russia – had abstained from voting on Resolution 1973 in the UN Security Council, at least managed to save face in the wake of international criticism for its passive stance. The mission's objective, namely to help the rebels overthrow Muammar al-Gaddafi, was achieved, but this was also the beginning of the end of the coalition of the willing.

> **Turkey has also used various means to bolster conservative Islamic groups in Libya, as it has done in other countries in the region.**
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The collapse of the coalition was followed by almost ten years of bloody conflict with shifting alliances, competing centres of power in eastern and western Libya, militias operating without legitimacy, and various foreign backers. In addition to the struggle for geostrategic influence by the ambitious powers Turkey and Russia – two countries that were originally critical of intervention – France, with its open support for General Haftar until 2020, also played a significant role in the conflict, and even conjured up a (further) conflict within NATO. Whereas most EU and NATO actors recognised the GNA as the main interlocutor, France openly sided with Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA). In this way, it not only stabbed its allies in the back, but also unwittingly protected Russian

intentions in Libya, culminating in the permanent installation of Russian Wagner mercenaries. However, by 2019, the narrative that Haftar was fighting Islamist terror and was generally a good partner for the international community was shattered when increased reports of LNA massacres emerged. Even if Paris was able to correct its position and save face – including through the Berlin Process – NATO's integrity was shaken by France's unilateral actions in the conflict.

A similar judgment can be made about Turkey's aggressive protectionist policy in Libya. While it must be noted that a political solution, such as the Berlin Process, only became possible because Turkey prevented the fall of Tripoli with a costly and personnel-intensive intervention – at the invitation of, and alongside, the UN-recognised GNA government – Turkey's role in the Libyan conflict remains dubious to this day. In the past, this NATO member repeatedly refused to let the EU's IRINI mission inspect Turkish ships off the Libyan coast to monitor compliance with the UN arms embargo. In addition, Turkey does not view the soldiers that it has stationed in Libya as foreign troops that should be withdrawn in the near future. In this respect, it refers to a 2019 agreement with the GNA. Libya is just one of several examples of how Turkey has expanded its role in the MENA region and its periphery. Turkey has also used various means to bolster conservative Islamic groups in Libya, as it has done in other countries in the region. At home and abroad, Turkey has faced regular criticism for the way it has poured troops and money into Libya. As early as 2015, critics within Turkey accused the government and President Erdoğan of supporting Islamist movements and groups in Libya.[23] Over the years, Turkey has consistently thrown its weight behind the government in Tripoli, and acted as a counterweight to Haftar's supporters.

It should be noted that every single actor in Libya has its own agenda for involvement in the conflict. Along with economic interests, primarily relating to investment in the oil sector, this includes issues such as political influence, strategic positioning in the Mediterranean region

Important process: UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the Berlin Conference on Libya in January 2020. In previous years, foreign actors had largely been unmoderated in supporting their respective favourites and allies with weapons, mercenaries, and propaganda. Source: © Axel Schmidt, Reuters.

or simply, as for Egypt, looking after its national interest by maintaining peace at its borders.[24] These varied interests were barely moderated in the past, and they have now led the external players to support their personal favourites with arms, regular and irregular troops, propaganda, and networks.

Conclusion

R2P is Important – but Follow-up Even More so

The principle of R2P is controversial but important. Massacres such as those in Srebrenica or Rwanda have taught the international community that a wait-and-see approach leads to its own complicity, which is difficult to justify. In

2011, Muammar al-Gaddafi and his troops stood outside Benghazi – with clear statements that foreshadowed what could have happened to the insurgents. It was therefore vital to stage a rapid intervention, and adopt a resolution; the push for a coordinated intervention led by NATO was the right one. The criticism that some of the main nations involved in this mission disregarded the original mandate early on, namely the pure protection of the civilian population, and got carried away with supporting the overthrow of Gaddafi, remains a debate among scholars of international law. But the Libyan people could hardly have been protected from Gaddafi's revenge in any other way. Protecting Benghazi and a show of force from the international community would not have sufficed to prevent the

dictator from taking revenge on the insurgents. It is certain that this would have been carried out in a more subtle fashion by his security apparatus, and by groups loyal to him throughout Libya. Therefore, there was no alternative to his overthrow. The fact that he was captured by Libyan rebels also increased the legitimacy of the international troops, which limited themselves to their support role. Therefore, NATO Secretary General Rasmussen was not wrong in his assessment during his visit to Libya, even if the expansion of the mandate is at least a grey area under international law. The success of Unified Protector stands in stark contrast to an almost unprecedented defeat, for which Europe is primarily responsible. Although a sense of fatigue after the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq is understandable, Paris, Rome, and Berlin should have realised that a state in their immediate neighbourhood that has ceased to exist will not simply rebuild itself.[25] Indeed, the country was left to its own devices or to a very rudimentary UN mission, which paid little attention to the security dimensions, and which dwindled in importance in the years that followed.

Light footprint operations will be the exception rather than the rule.

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Finally, it is necessary to mention the attempt by authoritarian states, especially Russia and China, to discredit the R2P approach and decry it as a Western pretext for staging eventually destabilising interventions. Russia has played a major role in Libya since 2019, and in the past gave particular support to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in his attempt to take control of western Libya. This involved Russia's private Wagner mercenaries directly opposing Turkish troops. In principle, Russia has been reserved and hesitant about the R2P approach, and is now deliberately using the Libya intervention as evidence to back up its concerns in this respect. According to Putin, the NATO intervention in 2011 was the trigger for the continuing chaos, and for the

outbreak of civil wars in Libya. This argument, however, may obscure Russia's real fear, namely that external intervention to prevent crimes against humanity could one day also be applied to governments that violate international law by claiming territory through force.

What Does the Case of Libya Mean for the Future?

The internationalised conflicts of the last decade reflect a reality that has already had economic repercussions in the past – the era of "Western" dominance is over and new players and regional hegemons are increasingly emerging, desirous of expanding their influence in specific regions, sometimes at any price. When it comes to Europe's immediate neighbourhood, as in the Libyan conflict, the EU and NATO should neither leave the field open to these actors, nor indirectly pursue a foreign policy with them that goes against their own allies. This is why, from the start, it is important to set a common course that does not permit unilateral action. This also makes it easier to keep strategic rivals in check, such as Russia and China – countries that have already acted as spoilers in conflicts, and will continue to do so. Furthermore, the following questions will remain central in future conflicts:

How to Strike a Balance between Value-driven and Interest-driven Foreign and Security Policy? Where is Intervention Worthwhile?

Military interventions are not particularly socially opportune in Europe and Germany. This is especially true when it relates to regime change in autocracies that are a threat to their own people, but which do not pose an immediate threat to Europe. It is commendable that R2P is fundamentally a concept that respects the moral compass and responsibility of the international community towards people who live in regions beset by conflict. What policymakers should be clear about, however, is that in the event of aggression by government forces that triggers the need for R2P, the continuation of the government in the conflict zone is not guaranteed and, in the vast majority of cases, not desirable. Therefore, light footprint operations

will be the exception rather than the rule, and interventions will be accompanied by regime change and the associated costly measures of state reconstruction.

To What Extent Do Interventions Create a Breeding Ground for New Conflicts?

Conflicts rarely resolve themselves, and even interventions are not always a guarantee of lasting peace. In the case of Libya, the intervention coupled with the relatively rapid waning of international interest in state reconstruction led to a major country in Europe's immediate neighbourhood turning into a hotbed and training ground for a range of conflicts that subsequently escalated. Fighters for the so-called Islamic State, who were trained and gained their first combat experience in Libya, later moved on to Syria and Iraq. Weapons and mercenaries moved relatively easily from Libya to the Sahel and back. Refugees (from other countries and internally displaced persons) became commodities for militias and organised crime. If Europe in particular had adopted a more comprehensive strategy for reconstruction after the fall of Gaddafi, it could have helped mitigate some of the aforementioned fallout from the collapse of the Libyan state. In the event of future conflicts on Europe's doorstep, it would, therefore, be desirable to have a proactive and, above all, coordinated European approach to minimise the risks of such a threat scenario.

– translated from German –

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In Retreat? Western Security Policy after Afghanistan

Intervention Is Not Always the Solution (but Neither Is Non-Intervention)

Example from Iraq and Syria

Simon Engelkes / David Labude

Is restraint priority number one? Much discussion currently revolves around the focus of future Western foreign policy and of military interventions. Simple black-and-white answers are of no help. Iraq and Syria are prime examples.

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The intervention by the US and its "coalition of the willing" in Iraq had far-reaching consequences for the country itself and the region beyond. In the years since 2003, Iraq was engulfed by civil war and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed; Iran took the opportunity to expand its influence over its neighbour. The invasion also contributed to the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS). The US paid a high price, too: more than a trillion US dollars and 4,000 dead US soldiers. What is more, it came to be seen as a brutal occupying power. The mission in Iraq, much like the engagement in Afghanistan, further strengthened widespread rejection of Western interventions.

No Western coalition did intervene in Syria, however – despite pressure from large swathes of the Syrian population and international human rights organisations, red lines crossed, and humanitarian emergency. To date, the conflict has claimed the lives of more than half a million people; seven million Syrians have been internally displaced (the highest figure worldwide) and almost seven million more have fled to neighbouring countries and Europe. Terrorist organisations exploited the power vacuum and are still present in the country. IS was also able to establish its government for a while. For years, Syria has been the scene of international proxy wars – and there is no end of conflict in sight. The case of Syria illustrates the consequences of Western inaction.

This article presents the major events of both conflicts as well as the background and repercussions of the intervention in Iraq and restraint in Syria. What challenges have arisen, both for the countries themselves and for the region and Europe? What do the two cases have in common,

and how do they differ? An examination of the two countries reveals that there is no single answer to the question of intervention: the intervention in Iraq plunged the country into years of chaos (it remains destabilised), and the consequences of inaction in Syria were no less devastating.

Iraq: The Necessity of Compromise

Relieved, Mohammed al-Halbusi steps in front of the cameras in early January 2022. The young leader of Iraq's strongest Sunni party, Taqadum, expresses his gratitude for his re-election as Parliament Speaker – the third most important office in the state. For the good of all Iraqis, all political parties must stand together, he urges. Tumult between Shiite MPs from Muqtada al-Sadr's Sai'roun movement and his rivals led by Nuri al-Maliki preceded the vote. The latter, ex-Prime Minister of Iraq, and his allies, including militia leader and founder of the Fatah Party (political arm of pro-Iranian forces) Hadi al-Amiri, had left the chamber before voting started. Votes from al-Sadr and the Sunni and Kurdish parties were sufficient for al-Halbusi to get elected. Conflict in the Shiite camp has intensified since Iraq's October 2021 parliamentary election. While Al-Sadr had won the election, Fatah had lost a lot of votes. Its chairman speaks of election manipulation. Several of its supporters died in violent protests in November. Despite the split in the Shiite camp, Iraq's sectarian and ethnically diverse political elites continue to bet on unification. The re-election of al-Halbusi is likely to be followed in the coming weeks and months by the election of compromise candidates for President and Prime Minister. Given the bloody conflicts in recent years, especially between Sunnis and Shiites, these agreements would not always have been possible.

Almost twenty years after the US-led invasion (Operation Iraqi Freedom), Iraq is still far from being a functioning democracy.[1] Conflicts that Saddam Hussein's regime stoked and at the same time violently suppressed, blazed up at the end of his reign and have yet to be resolved. However, the 2003 US intervention led to a fundamental political and societal change: there was the emergence of civil society and acceptance of a democratic constitution establishing a separation of powers and forcing political rivals to compromise. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, Head of the Iraqi Middle East Research Institute, believes that these changes would otherwise have scarcely been possible.[2] The US thus laid the unstable foundation for state-building that survives ten years after the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The 2019 protests and the ongoing violent clashes following the 2021 elections make it all the more important for Iraqis and their political leadership to further develop their state.

The Path to War

The 2003 US decision to invade Iraq continues to be highly controversial. Critics warned of unforeseeable consequences after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. The US government also justified the invasion by citing a growing threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and connections to the al-Qaeda terrorist network, which had carried out the attacks on 11 September 2001. But it was neither able to credibly document that Iraq supported al-Qaeda, nor did it find the regime's alleged chemical weapons.

At the time, the German Federal Government categorically refused to participate in military action against Iraq. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder termed the supposed evidence for Iraq's weapons of mass destruction "dubious", stating that an invasion on such a basis was illegitimate.[3]

In the UN Security Council, the veto powers of Russia and France also opposed intervention. This denied the United States a resolution as the basis for invasion. The US then decided to intervene without a UN mandate. On 19 March 2003, it began the invasion with the United Kingdom,

Australia, and Poland, and less than a month later, this "coalition of the willing" reached Baghdad. After militarily defeating the Hussein regime, the US had to rebuild the country from the ground up. Not only was the infrastructure damaged by the invasion and the Hussein dictatorship, but after 30 years of Baath Party rule, Iraqi society was completely divided.

Blunders and Flawed Post-War Planning

Prior to the invasion, US planning had been largely military. The question of how the country was to be moulded into a democracy after Hussein was eliminated was secondary. At first, insufficient funds were set aside for rebuilding and administration. The US administration also underestimated the societal conflicts between the Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish population groups. In particular, poor decisions in the first few months of occupation exacerbated tensions.

> ## Corruption and nepotism had rendered the Iraqi administration useless.
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Insufficient Rebuilding Capacity

The US government assumed that the military campaign would be of limited duration and cost. Following the end of hostilities, Iraqi security forces were to ensure law and order so that the majority of US combat troops could be withdrawn, leaving just 30,000 to 40,000 troops in the country.[4] The United States also expected a smooth transition of administration. After a few leaders belonging to the inner circle of the Baath Party were replaced, the Iraqi bureaucracy was to continue work as before.

In reality, corruption and nepotism had rendered the administration useless. The US decision taken in May 2003 to remove all Baath functionaries (85,000 officials) from public office and disband the security forces (720,000 policemen and soldiers) caused state institutions to collapse. This

power vacuum led to chaos and plundering across the country. Rapid reconstruction failed while most of the more than 20 billion US dollars of construction aid (until 2006) was lost to corruption.[5]

A Difficult Transition to Democracy

The tense security situation impeded the development of new political structures. Instability led to the postponement of Iraq's first democratic elections – a central US goal after the fall of the dictatorship and a primary concern of the Iraqi people. Moreover, the US heavily relied on exiled Iraqis for the political transition. These exiles were often unfamiliar with the situation in the country, but the primary problem is that they were unknown there. The US gave them a number of ministries in the newly formed transition government, which therefore lacked trust and legitimacy. Many Iraqis began to question American intentions.

> **In the 1980s and 1990s, Hussein's regime murdered hundreds of thousands of people.**
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After all, a democracy does not come into being after just a few months. The Hussein dictatorship had suppressed civil society, which is essential for democracy; there were no associations or trade unions and no wide selection of political parties. The Iraqi people had been excluded from the political process for three decades. Under Baath Party rule, it was impossible to peacefully negotiate opposing societal interests and resolve conflicts. A big reason for this was that important political leaders had fled the country out of fear of the Hussein regime.

A Society Divided

Iraq is very heterogeneous, both ethnically and religiously; the political and cultural contrasts among such groups as Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis, and Christians are striking. Saddam Hussein's reign of violence exacerbated the polarisation of Iraqi society. Hussein was a member of the Sunni religious community and privileged other members with public goods and resources, whereas he often excluded Shiites and Kurds from public office and persecuted them brutally. In the 1980s and 1990s, his regime murdered hundreds of thousands of people, foremost among them members of these two groups. Ethno-religious conflicts that had been stoked for decades broke out into the open following the end of Baath rule in 2003. Individual population groups demanded that their exclusive interests be enforced: Iraqi Kurds pushed for the secession of northern Iraq, where they formed the majority of the population, and the Shiite majority demanded a complete de-Baathification of the state and society. When in 2003 the US dissolved the Iraqi state apparatus, which was infiltrated by Baath party members, it inevitably incurred Sunni wrath. Sunni rebels targeted not only US interests, but also Shiites and Kurds, as many Sunnis saw their influence threatened. Under these conditions, says Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, a civil war was almost unavoidable, since "at the time, there were no institutions that could have mediated between hostile groups". The strong ethno-religious polarisation and militarisation of society also promoted confrontation.[6]

A Civil War and New Players

Sunni terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and later IS took advantage of the power vacuum arising from US intervention, gaining a foothold in Iraq for the first time. In addition to US troops, the international community also became the target of violent attacks. In August 2003, jihadists killed UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Iraq envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello in an attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad. Many Iraqis' frustration with the US occupation also fed extremist groups. Against them stood Shiite militias, often with ties to Iran. During Hussein's dictatorship, Iraq's Shiites had found refuge in Iran and returned after Hussein's fall. With their arrival, Iranian influence in the country increased.

During the Iraqi civil war mainly Sunni and Shia militias fought each other in bloody street battles, suicide bombings shook the country. The militias also began ethnic cleansing, partly as a revenge for previous demographic interventions by the Baath Party, which in the 1980s and 1990s had settled followers primarily in Shiite- and Kurdish-dominated areas and expelled supposedly oppositional population groups. The casualties – almost 30,000 in 2006 – led US experts to compare the Iraq intervention with the Vietnam War. The US massively reinforced its troop presence and involved local forces – not least Sunni adherents – in its security strategy for the first time, enabling it to contain the conflict. Clashes subsided in March 2008. The situation was relatively peaceful for a while.

In December 2008, President George W. Bush signed a Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that would lead to the withdrawal of most US troops by the end of 2011. Continuing the Iraq mission was no longer politically tenable: both sides were war-weary, with the Iraqis being particularly eager for a comprehensive withdrawal.

The IS genocide against the Yezidis and the attacks in Paris led to a paradigm shift.

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By the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom in December 2011, more than 120,000 Iraqi civilians had died.[7] As a result of the mass expulsions by Iraqi militias, 1.3 million Iraqis were internally displaced. More than two million people fled Iraq, almost 40,000 of whom applied for asylum in Germany.[8]

Rise of the Terrorist Militia and the Anti-IS Coalition in Iraq

Al-Maliki's policies heightened ethno-religious tensions once again. Many experts believe that his discrimination against Sunnis is responsible for the rise of IS starting in 2014. The Prime Minister led a campaign against prominent Sunni

politicians. In December 2011, he had Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak, and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi arrested, prompting Sunnis to turn their backs against the government. Iraq sank into an ethno-sectarian war once again.

The civil war in Syria, which broke out in 2011, fuelled the violence in Iraq. Having controlled large parts of Syria in 2014, IS invaded Iraq, occupying about a third of its territory. Large parts of the IS leadership structure in Iraq had been recruited from the old security cadres of the Saddam regime. Old hatreds and a security apparatus worn down by corruption facilitated its rapid advance. Iraq's security forces largely collapsed. In reaction, Christian, Sunni, and especially Shiite militias combined to form Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). With the remnants of the Iraqi army and the support of a US-led international alliance that included Germany, they succeeded in driving IS back.

Germany's participation in Operation Inherent Resolve broke a taboo. Since their formation, German armed forces had only participated in two armed conflicts abroad. The IS genocide against the Yezidis in August 2014 and the attacks in Paris in November 2015 led to a paradigm shift: in defiance of public opinion which opposed military engagement, Angela Merkel's government supplied weapons to Iraq's Kurds and provided the Iraqi army with instructors.

In December of 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi declared victory over IS, which has no longer controlled any Iraqi territory since then, but its members still carry out attacks. Some 70,000 Iraqi civilians died during IS rule, about 2,600 of them killed by anti-IS coalition troops.[9] Around 3.3 million people became refugees.[10] From 2014 to 2017, about 150,000 Iraqis submitted asylum applications in Germany.[11]

The anti-IS coalition is still operating. After Qassem Soleimani, Iran's top general, and his Iraqi confidant and pro-Iranian militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were killed in January 2020, the Iraqi parliament demanded a complete

withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq. Yet the decision was not binding for Iraq's government. The US then withdrew its combat troops in late 2021. But there are still 2,500 US soldiers in the country supporting Iraqi armed forces with training and military reconnaissance. The expansion of the NATO training mission in Iraq announced in February 2021, increasing the troop level from 500 soldiers to up to 4,000, has been delayed, however. Many NATO member states do not want to send troops, and hence the NATO contingent is likely to be smaller.

But the NATO mission does not play a large role for most Iraqis, says Farhad Alaaldin, chairman of Iraq Advisory Council; it is invisible, so to speak. NATO rarely appears in public. "Many Iraqis neither know who is part of the anti-IS coalition nor what NATO has to do with fighting IS", he says. Some considered NATO involvement a back door for the Americans to reinforce their troops. Only a few knew that the mission has nothing to do with the US. For the others, NATO and the US are one and the same thing: "foreign troops".[12]

Failed mission? Given the high number of casualties, US experts compare the Iraq intervention with the Vietnam War. Source: © Thaier Al-Sudani, Reuters.

balance of power that continues to be dominated by politicians and militias who gained strength after 2003.

In the October 2021 parliamentary elections, many Iraqis voted for new parties and independent candidates, many of which emerged from the 2019 protest movement. This is a signal that a growing share of the Iraqi public want change. The entry of these new parties into parliament could lay the foundation for a paradigm shift, changing the focus from identity politics based on confession and ethnicity to programme-based politics.

The security situation continues to be tense, but the threat has changed. In the past, it was primarily IS that destabilised the country. Now it is mostly pro-Iranian militias that challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force with attacks on US targets, civic leaders, and politicians. Such a militia allegedly carried out a drone attack on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in November 2021. Following the attack, Iraq's influential party leader Muqtada al-Sadr called on the Iran-backed militias to submit to the Iraqi government. Sadr's words are a declaration of war against Iran's militant forces in the country. After the electoral defeat of their political arm, the Fatah party, last October, they have been threatened with a further loss of political influence. This and the ongoing proxy war between the US and Iran could further exacerbate domestic conflicts.

Societal Compromise and Progress?

The IS threat led to an Iraqi truce that has lasted to this day. Iraq's political leaders are looking for compromises that will prevent violence from erupting again. The renewed support of primarily Shiite and Kurdish forces for Sunni party Chairman al-Halbusi in his election to the post of Parliament Speaker in January 2022 testified the commitment to political unity. The naming of compromise candidates for the offices of Prime Minister and President also illustrates the fragile

The current situation in Iraq is the result of the 2003 US intervention and its ramifications. The overthrow of the regime changed the political landscape of the country. But was it a change for the better? Given the victims of violence and the many unintended negative consequences, including for the US and its allies, even former supporters now find it difficult to provide an answer.

When the conflict in neighbouring Syria broke out ten years ago, many Western states feared that military intervention could lead to another fiasco. That is why they hesitated. But despite the restraint and without an intervention Syria suffered another humanitarian and political disaster.

Non-Intervention in Syria: Limited Options and a Lack of Political Will

Waad al-Kateab climbs hastily onto the ruins of a collapsed block of houses. Rescuers have helped a woman from the ruins, but a five-month-old baby is still missing. A Syrian regime helicopter has dropped a barrel bomb, the explosion shakes the entire residential quarter and is causing several buildings to collapse. This scene from the documentary film "For Sama" is just one example of the more than 10,000 airstrikes that the Syrian air force had flown over the city of Aleppo alone by the end of 2014.[13] Many Syrians would have liked to have no-fly zones or deliveries of air defence missiles from the West to neutralise Syrian "aerial killing capabilities", says Syrian political analyst Rime Allaf.[14] But the West did not deliver. Such an intervention would have made it more difficult to use chemical weapons against the civilian population and may have curbed migration to neighbouring countries and Europe. It was too late when Russia intervened on the side of the Assad regime in September 2015, but even in the years preceding this the West had faced significant obstacles to intervention.

When in 2011 Syria experienced an increasing spread of protests against President Bashar al-Assad to which the regime reacted with force, escalating in a civil war, many analysts assumed that the dictator would be quickly defeated.[15] The plethora of crises in the region, such as the instability in Egypt, Bahrain, and Tunisia, as well as the chaos in Libya, favoured the Syrian regime's survival. Above all, however, active support from Russia and Iran and indecision on the part of the West ensured its continued existence. In contrast to Europe's non-intervention against the Assad regime, other countries intervened in the conflict: Iran and allied militias,

Turkey, several Arab Gulf States, Israel, Jordan, the US, and Russia tried to assert their particular interests in Syria. The regime itself was rarely a direct target of such intervention, even of the later US-led military campaign against IS. There would have been scope for Western action against the Assad regime to protect the civilian population. Yet this was prevented by domestic policy considerations and a lack of political will.

> **Together with China, Russia has vetoed almost every UN resolution on Syria since the conflict began.**
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Powerful Friends and the UN Security Council Veto

In light of the state's mass executions, imprisonments, and torture of political dissidents, barrel bomb attacks, and the siege of entire cities with the associated starvation of the civilian population, which fled the country in their millions, Syria appears to be a textbook example of the need for humanitarian intervention under the principle of international Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Yet there was no multilateral intervention – not least because of a deadlock on the UN Security Council due to divergent positions of the US and Russia. Unlike in Iraq, the US and the European states did not act on their own initiative against Assad.

Together with China, Russia has vetoed almost every UN resolution on Syria since the conflict began. Since October 2011, the Russian government has exercised 16 vetoes and is still a "reliable diplomatic shield for the Assad regime".[16] The motivation for Moscow's blockade goes back to Western military intervention in Libya, among other things. President Vladimir Putin described the UN Security Council's Libya resolution as resembling "medieval calls for crusades".[17] The Libyan regime was not changed for humanitarian reasons, he said, but to advance Western power interests. A distrustful

Russia insinuates the same in Syria – Western heads of state have repeatedly called for Assad's removal.

Unsanctioned Use of Chemical Weapons

In Syria, the gulf between reality and rhetoric was great. As the conflict escalated, the Syrian regime's repeated use of chemical weapons on the outskirts of Damascus in August of 2013, represented an appalling climax in the conflict. As early as December of the previous year, US President Barack Obama had called chemical weapons use a "red line" which, if crossed, would prompt a US reaction. Much pointed towards a full-scale Western military strike or intervention in 2013.[18] But Obama was unwilling to act without the approval of the UN Security Council. The US was also war-weary, and Obama ruled out an extended air campaign or risky deployment of ground troops.[19]

> **A comprehensive regime change in Damascus was never a serious consideration on the Western agenda.**
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Public opinion in the United States also rejected military intervention after almost ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. These military deployments had devoured trillions of US dollars and cost the lives of thousands of soldiers. Without a direct threat to US interests, Obama would have had difficulty justifying intervention. Despite the poison gas attacks, polls continued to show that 63 per cent of the American population opposed intervention.[20] Moreover, nuclear negotiations with Iran influenced Europe's and the US's decision not to intervene in Syria. The US government did not want to jeopardise talks that might lead to containing the Iranian nuclear programme. Ultimately, many Western politicians feared that intervening in Syria could create a power vacuum like the one in Libya.[21] They did not want to open another Pandora's box in the region.

The reaction to Assad's use of chemical weapons was correspondingly restrained. However, this undermined Western credibility "as the guarantor of international agreements", encouraging Assad and his allies to adopt an even more offensive approach.[22] Increased diplomatic pressure did at least prompt the Russian government to approve a UN Security Council resolution in September 2013, the first time since the beginning of the conflict; it called for the destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal.[23] But the repeated use of chemical weapons in the years thereafter showed the global public that the regime had by no means destroyed all of its stocks. By May 2020, the count of chemical weapons attacks in Syria had reached almost 350.[24]

**No-Fly and Protection Zones:
A Missed Opportunity?**

A comprehensive regime change in Damascus was never a serious consideration on the Western agenda. In the wake of the poison gas attacks, however, the establishment of protection or no-fly zones was subject to discussion. Permanently closing down parts of the Syrian airspace would not have eliminated the causes of the conflict, but would have kept the Syrian air force away. These are the lessons of Bosnia (1993-1995) and Iraq (1991-2003). It would also have been a way to delay the advance of regime troops.[25] There would likely have been fewer carpet bombardments of population centres, and the enormous destruction of civil infrastructure, from which Syria still suffers, would have been less. Militarily secured protection zones would have been possible, in which the civilian population could have sought refuge.

For set-up and security, the West would have had to engage in a comprehensive intervention with ground troops, and Western military experts estimated that up to 40,000 soldiers would have been needed.[26] Europe was particularly unwilling. At the time, many European countries were still shaken by the economic and financial crisis. Only a few years earlier, Germany had suspended conscription and cut down

on its defence budget. Nor was further military engagement conceivable from a European perspective given the ongoing mission in Afghanistan.

Disunity in the West

From the start of the civil war, Assad had allies who were willing to do anything to keep him in power. Europe and the US, on the other hand, often had no unified strategy or ideas about Syria's future, with or without Assad. There was therefore no will for a more comprehensive engagement. In particular, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany struggled to achieve a common Syria policy. France and the United Kingdom supported Syrian opposition factions militarily, and in early 2013 called for the EU weapons embargo against Syria to be partially lifted. Germany, on the other hand, opposed weapons deliveries to the rebels on the grounds that they might destabilise the region. Only when the European partners threatened not to extend sanctions against Syria was there a modification of the EU weapons embargo.[27] But the arming of individual Syrian opposition groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) remained limited. For instance, they did not receive anti-aircraft missiles from the West. There were worries that delivered weapons systems would be lost in the fog of war or fall into the hands of extremist groups. One major worry was that these groups would attack civilian aviation.

The disunity and hesitation unsettled Western states' Syrian allies. US President Donald Trump's announcement that he would withdraw

Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin visit an Orthodox Christian cathedral in Damascus in 2020: A few years earlier, with the Assad regime on the brink of defeat, Russia had intervened supporting its ally and creating military facts. Source: © Alexei Druzhinin, Sputnik / Kremlin, via Reuters.

all US troops from northern Syria east of the Euphrates in 2019 surprised US allies, especially the SDF, which was dominated by Syrian Kurds. The events in Syria even triggered quarrels within NATO. French President Emmanuel Macron called the alliance "brain dead" in light of the lack of coordination between the US and its allies on strategic decisions. Western reliability with respect to assisting partners in crisis situations has been increasingly called into doubt since the war in Syria.

Rise of the Terrorist Militia and the Anti-IS Coalition in Syria

As of 2014, the Assad regime increasingly found itself on the defensive and had to focus its military efforts mainly on strategic targets and urban centres. The withdrawal from rural areas facilitated advances by several rebel groups and Islamist forces, and later IS, whose terrorist attacks in Europe, brutality, and the proclamation of its "caliphate" in large swathes of Syria and Iraq, as well as an effective media campaign of beheadings of Western hostages, gave new impetus to the debate on intervention in Syria in Washington and European capitals. IS atrocities were another sad climax in the Syrian conflict.

In contrast to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, the IS advance led to an international military reaction. The military alliance against IS united the European partners behind the same goal. In Iraq, the anti-IS coalition acted by invitation from the government, but in Syria it took the field without formal approval. The US-led alliance primarily supported the Kurd-dominated SDF as "ground components". As in Iraq, IS was defeated territorially in Syria, but IS terror cells remain active in both countries to this day.

The Intervention of the "Others"

When the Assad regime was on the brink of defeat in 2015, in September Russia intervened on the side of its ally, creating new military facts on the ground. Russia's intervention focused on preventing the regime from collapsing and on acting as a new ordering power in the region.[28] The Russian intervention ended any chance of multilateral intervention, since Western forces would have risked direct confrontation with Russia. The Russian government thus became a key player in Syria, blamed by the UN for numerous bombings of civilian infrastructure.

> **There is currently a trend among states towards normalising relations with the Assad regime.**
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Regional allies of Assad such as Iran had already joined the conflict. The Iranian government initially supplied weapons and intervened from mid-2013 with its own troops and allied militias. Starting in 2016, Turkey, an Assad opponent, also repeatedly intervened in Syria with ground troops with the aim of preventing Kurdish attempts to become autonomous. The more other powers expanded their influence in the region, the more the West was relegated to the role of spectator.

Assad Regains Strength

With the help of allies, the Assad regime was able to recapture strategically important regions from the rebels starting in late 2016. It currently controls about 65 per cent of Syrian territory, and following more than a decade of war, there is no end of Assad rule in sight. Since the outbreak of hostilities, more than half a million people were killed, hundreds of thousands have been displaced, and the economy and infrastructure are in ruins. Roughly 13.4 million people, or over 65 per cent of the Syrian population currently depend on humanitarian aid. About six million people are internally displaced, and almost seven million have fled the country. Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, Syria's neighbours, host almost 5.6 million refugees and as of November 2021, almost 700,000 Syrians had applied for asylum in Germany.[29] They still have no hope of return, since persecution and

death await them under the Assad regime. The UN called the Syrian crisis the worst man-made disaster since the Second World War.[30]

The US and Europe did not want to risk a confrontation with Russia or Iran.

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There is currently a trend among states towards normalising relations with the Assad regime. Especially regional neighbours such as Jordan, Egypt, and several Gulf States are seeking rapprochement with Damascus. The US and Europe continue to refuse this course, but do not sanction the efforts of Syria's neighbours. Friendly relations with Assad no longer seem to be a taboo despite the blood on his hands.

Is Restraint Priority Number One?

Syria is an example of a new security policy reality in the context of increasing "Westlessness" – the relative withdrawal of the US and its European allies as players guaranteeing order.[31] The conflict bears witness to how foreign policy restraint coupled with a blockade of the instruments and institutions of international conflict resolution can lead to more human suffering and strengthen authoritarian regimes. While Europe and Syria's neighbours are affected by the aftermath of war through refugee movements and tendencies towards societal polarisation, Russia and Iran are expanding their political influence in the region.

There was no political will to intervene in Syria. Democratic societies are especially prone to regular changes in their domestic balances of power and multifaceted interests, making long-term commitments difficult unless vital interests are at stake. Not least, the US and Europe did not want to risk a confrontation with Russia or Iran. Instead, they exerted diplomatic pressure and imposed economic sanctions on the Assad regime; measures that to this day have not led to any concessions in Damascus. At the same time, no credible military deterrence was set up.

Intervention narratives feed on past experiences. While the failed 1993 UN operation in Somalia was decisive for hesitation during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the failure of the West during the 1995 Srebrenica massacre enabled the 1999 Kosovo intervention. The decision not to act in Syria can also be traced back to the costly, controversial engagement in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq. Iraq shows that an intervention can end in a fiasco if planning is based on unrealistic ideas and incomplete knowledge. The US underestimated the societal and political fault lines, with poor American decisions exacerbating tensions.

The cases of Iraq and Syria show that military interventions as well as restraint to engage with force are associated with many challenges and can exacerbate or provoke further problems. Neither approach can serve as a model of Western foreign engagement. The conclusion for Western foreign and security policy must not be to renounce interventions in principle. In hindsight, it can be stated that military interventions should pursue realistic goals as well as a holistic approach – an engagement in international crises that includes the resources of diplomacy, development cooperation, security policy, and humanitarian aid. Last but not least, there must be a willingness to engage in the long term if necessary – particularly in facilitation roles and in dialogue with the local population. After all, even inaction can have dramatic consequences: restraint in Syria ultimately contributed to the humanitarian crisis we see today.

– translated from German –

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In Retreat? Western Security Policy after Afghanistan

War Foretold

On the Genesis and Development of
Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

Thomas Schrapel

Anyone dealing with post-Soviet conflicts between former Soviet republics as a "neutral" foreigner can be sure that in the best case, he or she will only be accepted by one side at a time. It is virtually impossible to be perceived as a "neutral" within an argument. This complicates the goal of organising political dialogue about the problem. Concerning Nagorno-Karabakh, familiarity with the genesis of the conflict's historical and international legal developments is indispensable and relevant regarding policy options for international actors.

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On 27 September 2020, a third war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave began, along a front line over 200 kilometres in length. It ended on 9 November 2020, with a temporary ceasefire agreement under the aegis of the President of the Russian Federation. Although the European Union and particularly the member states of the OSCE's "Minsk Group" seemed surprised,[1] it was clear to anyone closely involved in the dispute that this war was "on the cards". This time, it was suspended with an almost devastating defeat for the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, and thus, for the Republic of Armenia. Just over a third of the disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh is now under the rule of Azerbaijani troops, who have taken up positions only a few kilometres from the enclave's capital, Stepanakert. The historical capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Shusha (Azerbaijani) or Shushi (Armenian), is under Azerbaijani control. We should definitely view this circumstance as a symbol within a conflict loaded with symbolism.[2]

In 1994, Armenia had occupied a total of seven Azerbaijani regions directly bordering Nagorno-Karabakh and declared them military "buffer zones". These seven regions, to which in the last 30 years Armenia never officially laid claim under international law, have come under Baku's control during this most recent war. The complete loss of the military "buffer zone" (from Armenia's point of view) was one thing. The other, much more dramatic result of this armed conflict – again, from the Armenian point of view – was the loss of a good third of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The agreement between the Republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Russian Federation, negotiated on 9 November 2020 and officially enforced the following day, is formally a ceasefire. To regulate the ceasefire, Russia was granted a peacekeeping role primarily to secure the five-kilometre-wide corridor between the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian border – the "Lachin Corridor". Conversely, the Armenians are to grant the Azerbaijanis a direct route between Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan exclave. Accordingly, Azerbaijanis would have the right to cross the territory of the Republic of Armenia.

No Security Guarantees for the Armenians

Another highly explosive detail is hidden in the agreed duration of the ceasefire. It is valid for five years. If either Azerbaijan or Armenia terminates the agreement before the end of this period, Russia's peacekeeping mission will also immediately come to an end. From the Armenian point of view, this means that premature termination of the ceasefire by Azerbaijan would expose Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to full-scale administration by Baku, with no prospect of Russian troop support; and thus, completely invalidating the claim that is crucial for Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, namely the question of security guarantees.

Fig. 1: Current Territorial Situation

Nagorno-Karabakh
Under Armenian control
Regained by Azerbaijan in 2020

Lachin Corridor
Zangezur Corridor

Source: Own illustration, map: Natural Earth ®.

The Resounding Silence of the International Community

At the Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels on 15 December 2021, the Council of the European Union published a joint declaration of all participants.[3] In an annex, the "Post-2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities" were formulated. It states that as part of a common security and stability policy both civilian and military missions will be supported in the future. One year after the provisional end of the third Nagorno-Karabakh war, this sounds more focused on results than in the past. On the other hand, the sincerity of these statements comes into question. The Republic of Armenia in particular felt abandoned by the international community during the almost seven-week war from September to November 2020. The extent to which the European Union helplessly and listlessly looked on at the war from 27 September to 9 November 2020 is indeed astonishing. It was, after all, a war between two Eastern Partnership actors and, moreover, one waged with ultra-modern weapons. The latter was the reason why the German Bundeswehr and the Ministry of Defence at least were interested in the war. The few public statements from the German Bundestag, its Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Human Rights Committee were general and addressed both warring parties. During the last conflict

in autumn 2020, nothing was heard from the "Minsk Group" of the OSCE, the institution most responsible for mediating peace between conflicting parties.

Misleading Dominance of the Geopolitical Narrative in Current News Coverage

In media coverage and, for the most part, scholarly articles, a geopolitical narrative has dominated as the primary explanation for the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Accordingly, the two main actors[4] ultimately appear only as pieces in a game played by the regional powers Russia, Turkey, and Iran. There is no doubt that Russia and Turkey are pursuing their own goals through the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and with Iran, another actor in regional geopolitics has re-emerged. Even Israel's massive arms sales to Azerbaijan, including the drones that ultimately decided the war, are likely to have served more than mere business interests.

However, this dominant geopolitical narrative in media coverage too often obscures the view of the indigenous process within Azerbaijan and Armenia. These nations and the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave are not only objects, but to a much greater extent, subjects taking part in these violent proceedings. The regional geopolitical situation has changed several times over the 20th
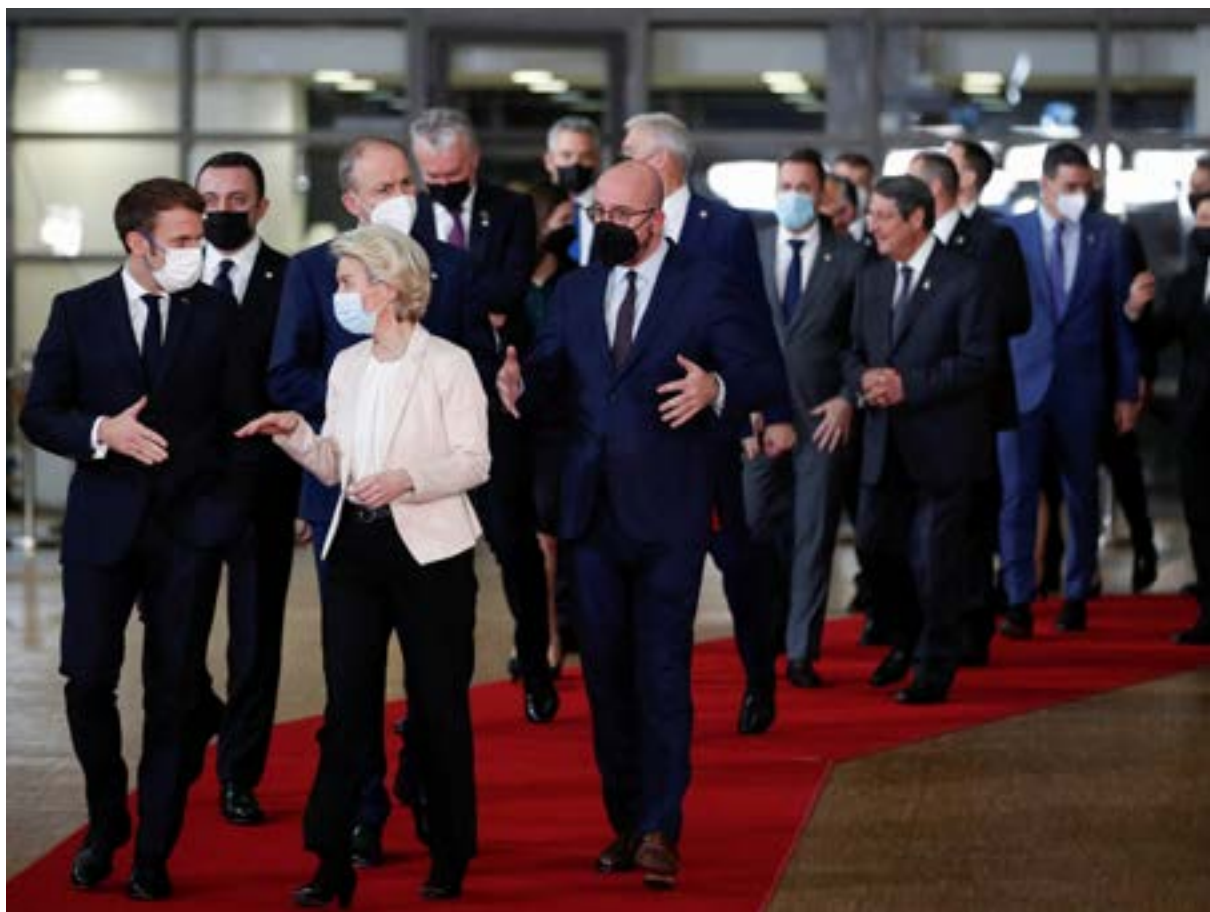
century, especially the relationship between the Russian or Soviet Empires and the Ottoman Empire or Turkey. The bilateral conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, on the other hand, has remained the same for a good hundred years. This should also define the temporal and political framework on which this article is based.

One Hundred Years of Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The establishment of Bolshevik power in the southern Caucasus initially stirred up the "Armenian Question". The direct causes of the actual Nagorno-Karabakh conflict rest in the late nation-building of Azerbaijan (influenced by Pan-Turkist motives), the beginning of Soviet nationality policy in the South Caucasus, and the failure to respond to the "Armenian Question". So the conflict is about a hundred years old, making it the oldest intra-ethnic conflict in the post-Soviet space. The Christian Armenians did not fit into the Pan-Turkist ideas, and certainly not with an autonomous territory that would have united all areas densely populated by Armenians. This consideration is a fundamental basis of today's conflict. Shortly after the First World War, the idea of peoples' right to self-determination was booming internationally. Nevertheless, this is precisely what was denied to the Armenians.

For 70 years, this conflict took place under the protective shield of the Soviet Union. Thanks to a strong central power, the conflict remained

Eastern Partnership summit: Although both Armenia and Azerbaijan are members of this European Union initiative, the EU helplessly and listlessly stood back in the most recent war. Source: © Johanna Geron, Reuters.

"peaceful" during this period, as it could not be carried out with open and massively armed violence. However, even in the Soviet era, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute was by no means pacified. If at all, the term "frozen conflict", commonly used worldwide today, fits the time of the Soviet empire.

Under international law, there is no peace treaty but a temporary halt to hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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End of the Soviet Empire – Chaos and National Rebirth

However, since at least 1988, the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia has developed into a war with many victims. Regardless of discussions of international law, including the territorial principle as the most important argument from the Azerbaijani side, and peoples' right to self-determination as the main Armenian narrative, in both cases new realities were created by armed violence. This began with the first Nagorno-Karabakh war from 1991 to 1994, the second war in April 2016 (based on the status quo[5] created in 1994), and finally, the third war from 27 September to 9 November 2020. Especially considering this history, the term "frozen" is not sufficient for characterising the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict because it erroneously suggests that ceasefires automatically lead to negotiations. Particularly in this case, it is clear that scarcely any substantial progress towards resolving the conflict has been made between ceasefires. When looking at the current situation and the follow-up to the most recent clash, the most likely conclusion is that the conflict is not at an end. Under international law, this is not a peace treaty but a temporary halt to hostilities.

Above all, it must be noted that even with this ceasefire agreement, the legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh has not been settled in any way. Yet this would be a prerequisite for guaranteeing the long-term security of Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh. This goal now seems even more distant. Azerbaijan still sees no reason to conduct any negotiations regarding the legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh. More than a third of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory is now under Baku's direct control.

Sovietisation and Nationalisation as Conflict Catalysts

The emergence of the two nations, Azerbaijan and Armenia, can only be understood in the context of the First World War. In this respect, geopolitical and strategic considerations played a prominent role, particularly from the Russian and Ottoman sides. There is no doubt that the emergence of the Azerbaijani nation was strongly promoted by the Ottoman Empire. Armenia, in turn, had Russia on its side, although the relationship was never free of tension. Even in Tsarist Russia, the leadership was never interested in "uniting the predominantly Armenian-populated territories in the South Caucasus into one administrative unit. In no way did it want to encourage Armenian aspirations to form a nation-state".[6] The "Armenian Question" was always a delicate one for the regional powers. Even the Bolsheviks of the Soviet Union had no interest in adapting the territory of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia to the actual settlement areas of the Armenian population. However, this would have certainly been possible according to the geography of the South Caucasus and would have corresponded to the Bolshevik ideological concept of nation and empire.[7]

It is one of the 20th-century paradoxes that the Bolsheviks, despite being the "vanguards" of Marxist-Leninist ideology, were very un-Marxist when it came to organising the Soviet empire. The empire's inhabitants were not only citizens of the Soviet Union but also of a particular nation, which in turn was (or was supposed to be) essentially ethnically defined.[8] This approach to state organisation is far removed from a pure "Marxist class standpoint". After all,

nations were supposed to become irrelevant. In this way, the Bolsheviks – perhaps unintentionally – set a spark alight, which grew into a smouldering fire with the end of their empire. The fire has not yet been extinguished, nor does it even seem to be under control.

After 1915, the South Caucasus became even more of a refuge for survivors of the Armenian genocide.

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Politics and Propaganda in the Quarries of History

The Long Shadow of the 1915 Genocide

Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, the South Caucasus increasingly became a place of refuge for Armenians from the entire Ottoman Empire. The places and cities dominating today's discourse, such as Yerevan, Zangezur, Nakhichevan, Stepanakert, Shusha or Shushi, and Karabakh itself, were already geographical hotspots for the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh that developed in the late 19th century. A regional tinderbox came into being due to the First World War, the October Revolution, and the post-civil war expansion of Bolshevik rule to the South Caucasus around the years 1920/1921.

After 1915, the South Caucasus became even more of a refuge for survivors of the Armenian genocide. Their memory narratives and culture became a driving force for Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and remain so today.[9] In the short period of existence of the first republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia, from 1918 to 1920, a spiral of violence developed between the two peoples with mutual massacres having taken place in various parts of the South Caucasus. In March 1918, thousands of Azerbaijanis were victims of pogroms by the predominantly Armenian units in Baku and some surrounding areas. Stepan Schahumjan, the Armenian-born Georgian Bolshevik leader

of the "Baku Commune"[10], played a particularly dire role.[11] In turn, in September 1918, a massacre of Armenians was carried out by Azerbaijani troops with the active support of the Ottomans, which gave the Armenians a horrific déjà vu. As for its scale, regarding this early phase of the violent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the March 1920 massacre must be mentioned. Some 22,000 Armenians were mourned.[12]

Collective Memory and Trauma

Listing all of the massacres, pogroms, and counter-massacres here would be pointless. The beginnings of the violent conflict need to be outlined because they shape the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. To this day, the mutual reckoning and representation of pogroms and actual or alleged counter-pogroms of the last century is a tried and tested means used by political actors to legitimise their actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the current controversy, these "legitimations" generally refer to the mutual pogroms since 1988. Yet this does not help the parties move any closer towards meaningful dialogue.

Nagorno-Karabakh – The Poisoned Legacy of Tsarist and Soviet Nationality Politics

The final takeover of the South Caucasus by the Bolsheviks became the culmination of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The territories had briefly organised as national republics. This only lasted until 1920, however, when the Bolsheviks also inherited the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For the Armenians, this change of power implied some new political and ideological demands, but not all connotations were negative from the start.[13] The Armenians "only" needed to remind the Bolsheviks of their own stipulations. With respect to the legal position of the "peoples of the Soviet Union", the "peoples' right to self-determination" was emphatically declared even prior to the October Revolution.[14]

However, the Bolshevik nationality policy already played an important role in the territorial

In high spirits: In the 2020 war, Azerbaijan gained control over significant portions of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding zones. Source: © Umit Bektas, Reuters.

national division of the Caucasus. The "People's Commissar of Nationalities", J. V. Stalin, ultimately intervened personally in the negotiations. Clearly, the leadership of the existing Russian Communist Party wanted to avoid granting a unified state territory to an area densely populated by Armenians. By and large, the territory that currently exists as the Republic of Armenia became the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) with Yerevan as its capital. On the other hand, Nakhichevan, which with Yerevan had belonged to the "Armenian Oblast" within the Tsarist Empire since 1849, was detached and declared an autonomous territory. From Azerbaijan's perspective and following their own narrative, this was considered an exclave

without direct borders to Azerbaijan. With the isolation of Nagorno-Karabakh, the relatively compact Armenian area was divided into three: Armenia, Nakhichevan, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Russian-Turkish treaty of 16 March 1921, which came about largely through Turkish pressure, contained one remarkable clause.[15] The "autonomous territory" of Nakhichevan was to be subordinated to the protectorate of Azerbaijan and "never left to a third state". This "third state" could only mean Armenia in this situation. With some 50,000 inhabitants in Nakhichevan, the Armenians had a relative majority who, however, now felt entirely isolated according to this agreement.

A Fatal Decision with Stalin's Signature

In contrast, Nagorno-Karabakh was an area with an even clearer majority of Armenians around one hundred years ago, the latter constituting some 90 per cent of the population. In the summer of 1921, the decision regarding the status of Nagorno-Karabakh was pending. From the Bolshevik point of view, the relevant body for this was the Caucasus Bureau (Kavbiuro) of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). The negotiations of 4 to 5 July 1921 illustrate the complexity and confusion in the debate around the causes of the dispute.

At the meeting on 4 July, the panel decided to assign Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian SSR.[16] During the meeting on 5 July, which Stalin personally attended despite not being a formal member, the vote was re-cast, and Nagorno-Karabakh was awarded to the Azerbaijani SSR with a majority of one vote. We can assume that economic or administrative considerations played a role in this decision. However, Stalin was probably mindful about not letting the Armenian SSR grow too large.[17] That had already been the policy pursued by the Tsarist empire.

The Gordian Knot in the Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute – Territoriality Principle versus Peoples' Right to Self-Determination, and the Western Perception

In the rhetorical dispute around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Azerbaijani and Armenian narratives are so diametrically opposed that it hardly seems helpful to revive discussions. Nevertheless, those like the EU and Germany, who have so far ruled out military means of resolution must at least position and prepare themselves to engage in broad political dialogue. Otherwise, how can an ambitious programme like the Eastern Partnership be implemented?

The legitimacy of both narratives of international law, "territorial inviolability" and "peoples' right to self-determination", as well as their practical applicability, must be discussed

in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. The situation is far from clear. At least since the beginning of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war (1991 to 1994), there have been discrepancies between the perception of both the direct parties and third-party observers, on the one hand, and the actual situation and the state of research, on the other. Among these third parties are the Germans, who are involved in the Eastern Partnership Programme and members of the OSCE's Minsk Mediation Group. What is the German perception of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? Who is right to claim the 4,400 square kilometres of land on which, until 27 September 2020, close to 150,000 Armenians were living?[18]

The Armenian narrative emphasises the peoples' right to self-determination.
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The Deceptive Feeling of Being "Neutral"

The Azerbaijani narrative is based on the principle of territorial integrity under international law. Four UN Security Council Resolutions from 1993 are repeatedly availed of to support this position. These are Resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884.[19] They call on Armenia to vacate the seven regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh that they conquered from 1991 to 1994. Both sides are equally called upon to renounce violence. From the Azerbaijani perspective, however, the Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh should on no account be accepted as independent subjects in any negotiations. The Azerbaijanis continuously repeat this position in countless press releases, position papers, and statements. Many international actors in the bodies and institutions of the EU, OSCE, and the Council of Europe have adopted this interpretation.

On the other hand, the Armenian narrative emphasises the peoples' right to self-determination under international law. This played an important role at the start of Sovietisation

and, thus, in Bolshevik nationality policy. Yet the Armenian argument is more complicated and requires the recipient to acknowledge the complex genesis of the "Armenian Question". It requires recognition of the Armenian need for security as evidenced, for example, by the 1915 genocide. Should this argument be declared false and thus, be ignored? To date, there has been no firm offer from any international actors to guarantee the security of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. In the aftermath of the last war, their position has become even more precarious.

However, legitimation based solely on the territorial principle according to the Azerbaijani narrative can neither be justified by international law nor historically. This is not an entirely new insight, but it scarcely plays a role in the public dispute.[20] Supposedly "neutral" views ultimately serve only the Azerbaijani narrative.

Otto Luchterhandt, longstanding Professor of International Law in Hamburg, has taken a greater interest in the international law perspective than anyone to date. He has examined the status of Nagorno-Karabakh in numerous publications. Referring to the "Law of Withdrawal" from April 1990, he summarised: "The fact that the basis of the decision on Karabakh, made in 1921 based on political power calculations, had therefore ceased to exist, has remained hidden to the main actors of the international community until today." The "Law of Withdrawal" from April 1990 regulated the formalities for the case that a Soviet republic wished to withdraw from the Soviet Union. This option was also included in earlier constitutions of the Soviet Union, admittedly without ever being actually used. However, the "Law of Withdrawal" – or as the additional passage is precisely worded: "on the procedure of deciding the issues involved in the withdrawal of a Union republic" went beyond that, because it also regulated what should happen to the autonomous territorial entities lying within the territory of the Soviet republics.[21]

Accordingly, a Soviet republic could declare withdrawal from the Soviet Union, as was theoretically possible since the first Soviet Constitution. With the "Law of Withdrawal" from April 1990, the fate of the people living within an autonomous territorial entity was also to be clarified under international law. In this specific case, the question arose: what would happen to the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh if the titular nation of Azerbaijan were to secede from the Soviet Union by referendum? According to the withdrawal law, in this case, the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh would have to hold their own referendum. The choices would be to continue to belong to Azerbaijan, thus leaving the Soviet Union, or to leave Azerbaijan, remaining part of the Soviet Union. Precisely this second option was selected by the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh when they declared their continued affiliation with the Soviet Union in ordinary and free proceedings on 10 December 1991. However, this was not recognised or simply ignored by Azerbaijan.

The German public has little interest in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

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Azerbaijan's declaration of independence by the Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijani SSR on 30 August 1991, took place within the framework of valid Soviet law, with the Soviet Union continuing to exist as a subject of international law. Accordingly, Azerbaijan was required to recognise the referendum of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. Thus, if Baku claimed its right to withdraw from the Soviet Union under Soviet law while ignoring Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians' rights under that same law, the Azerbaijani withdrawal procedure would then be legally "up in the air".[22]

Germany's Diffuse Positioning in this Conflict

Hardly anyone in Germany would seriously even consider the thought of military intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This presents the question of what the Eastern Partnership

treaty provides for in case of war between two member nations. Offers to date from the EU within the Eastern Partnership framework fall far short of the goals it has set for itself. For both Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute plays a prominent role in their foreign and domestic policy. For this reason alone, the Eastern Partnership programme needs to react with reasonable offers that call out the topic by name.

It would be a step forward if German politicians were better informed about the current situation in the South Caucasus.
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The German public has little interest in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. [23] If we consider the corresponding public events during and immediately after the (provisional) end of the last war, it is striking that nothing has changed in the narratives or on the frontline positions. There has been much debate accompanied by many rhetorical smokescreens regarding who engaged first on 27 September 2020 and who used weapons prohibited by international law, or whether Syrian mercenaries were involved, as American and Russian secret services independently determined. In the end, discussions always return to the legal controversy on which the conflict is founded. It is unsettling that the recent analyses mentioned above have minimal or no influence on the discussions. In addition, the processes known for at least a decade as "caviar diplomacy" have not been systematically pursued and addressed. [24]

It would be a step forward if German politicians were better informed about the current situation in the South Caucasus. [25] This cannot be understood without considering the two main historical cornerstones of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, namely denial of self-determination for the Armenians at the start of the Soviet Union and the "Withdrawal Proceedings" at the end of the empire. When it comes to which narrative

has greater legitimacy, historically and under international law, then we should go beyond the mere repetition of the Azerbaijanis' argument. The permanent reference to the four UN Resolutions from 1993 is not the final word on the subject. This alone cannot clear up today's situation, and nothing can be gained from it in the sense of a mutually recognised peace.

No reference to the legitimacy of the Azerbaijani withdrawal procedure and that of Nagorno-Karabakh is found in any official statement, for example, of the Bundestag. German politicians and most of those responsible for addressing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict still seem to prefer the Azerbaijani narrative. Its ideological foundation goes back to the strategic considerations of J. V. Stalin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the Soviet Union. Should such considerations not also play a role in a values-based foreign policy?

The West between Complacent Peace Rhetoric, Political Apathy, and Diplomatic Routine

During the last war from 27 September to 9 November 2020, the group responsible for solving the conflict, the OSCE's "Minsk Group", did not take a *single* substantial initiative towards sustainable peace. Even the European Union, which has been linked to the nations in the South Caucasus for two decades through various bilateral and multilateral agreements, made no visible contribution and maintained silence. The Council of Europe, the most important institution for observing human rights, includes full members Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and recently returned Russia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict as a Challenge for the Community of European and Christian Values, and the Role of Germany

For 30 years, Russia has been the only international actor able to promote a peaceful solution to the conflict. The ceasefire agreements of 1994, 2016, and most recently of 9 November 2020, all came about through Russian initiatives. The security situation of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh has been extremely fragile

since the ceasefire agreement came into force on 10 November 2020. Without dramatising the situation, this much is clear: right now, the security of the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh depends exclusively on some 2,000 soldiers from the Russian peacekeeping mission.

Nagorno-Karabakh is also one of the most important sites of early Christianity. Legacies in the form of churches, monasteries, and cemeteries date back to the fifth century. The integrity of these unique Christian monuments is currently guaranteed only by Russia. Considering the oft-cited and evoked European "community of values", it is disturbing that the West barely considers this aspect.

If the West is serious about bringing peace between the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians, it must speak to Russia. During the German presidency of the OSCE in 2016, Russia made offers that would have amounted to a division of labour in this regard. These could be followed up. However, Western European relations with Russia have not improved since that time.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, no real dialogue has taken place between Azerbaijan and Armenia. At best, there have been announcements of diametrically opposed positions. Germany could make a substantial contribution by creating conditions for the start of a dialogue. Such a dialogue cannot be about favouring the territorial principle or peoples' right to self-determination. The highly complex mixture of issues calls for political solutions.

– translated from German –

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1   The "Minsk Group" of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was established in 1992 to act as a mediator between the conflicting parties after the temporary ceasefire in the 1991-1994 war. Co-chairs of the group are Russia, the US, and France; members include the UK, Italy, Germany, and Turkey.

2   The mere use of the name "Shusha" versus "Shushi" can lead to enormous controversy.

3   Council of the European Union 2021: Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, printed matter 14964/21, 15 Dec 2021, in: https://europa.eu/!XT9MPm [6 Jan 2022].

4   Actually, there are three actors here with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Republic of Artsakh. From the Armenian perspective, the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave is a part of Armenia, although the Republic of Armenia has also not recognised the Republic of Artsakh proclaimed by the Nagorno-Karabakh population. From the Azerbaijani perspective, the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh are not perceived as independent subjects.

5   The "Four-Day War" ended with a heavy defeat of the Azerbaijanis.

6   Luchterhandt, Otto 2010: Berg-Karabachs Selbstbestimmungsrecht: Begründung und praktische Folgen, in: Soghomonyan, Varam (ed.) Lösungsansätze für Berg-Karabach/Arzach. Selbstbestimmung und der Weg zur Anerkennung, Baden-Baden, p.7. Here are details for further literature regarding the settlement area of the Armenians within the Ottoman Empire, especially during the 19th century.

7   For more on Stalin's role, see n.16.

8   For this reason, they also had two entries in their passports: Soviet citizen and Armenian (example).

9   Understanding this connection between 1915 and the war over Nagorno-Karabakh is a prerequisite for comprehending the Armenian narrative.

10 The "Baku Commune" was a very early Soviet region, constituted a few days after the October Revolution in Baku.

11 For more details, see Baberowski, Jörg 2003: Der Feind ist überall. Stalinismus im Kaukasus, Munich, pp.141 ff.

12 On this in more detail Luchterhandt 2010, n.6, here: pp. 7–9. During this massacre, the Armenian-populated part of Shushi was completely destroyed and all remains, including cemeteries, were leveled during the Soviet period.

13 The following remarks are based on the excellent analysis by Luchterhandt 2010, n.6, here: pp.10 ff.

14 In the "Declaration of the Rights of Working and Exploited Peoples" from 29 January (Gregorian) 1918, this was explicitly and exclusively established for Armenia. Luchterhandt points out that this passage was even included in the first Constitution of the RSFSR.

15 See Luchterhandt 2010, n.6, p.10.

16 Krüger, Heiko 2009: Der Berg-Karabach-Konflikt. Eine juristische Analyse, Heidelberg. Krüger's interpretation is that the meeting on 4 July 1921 was only preparation for the actual decision to be made on 5 July 1921. This downplays the dramatic nature of the decision-making process. Nariman N. Narimov, the chairman of the Azerbaijan Communist Party and member of the panel, resorted to a trick in postponing the decision in order to see it brought about by Moscow. In fact, no one less than J. V. Stalin would decide.

17 The Bolsheviks did not make it easy for themselves to draw borders. They were not created with a ruler and a pencil nor with straight lines on the map. They took traditional habits and determinations into account. In this case, the circumstances played a role. Many Azeri farmers habitually used the summer pastures around Nagorno-Karabakh for their cattle. Thus, for the sake of a unified administration, it seemed to some more efficient to assign the territory to Azerbaijan. This economic consideration, however, is only one aspect of the problem.

18 There are no precise figures now regarding the numbers who fled Nagorno-Karabakh and returned to Armenia during the last war. According to the most recent figures, there are approximately 80,000 Armenians who have returned to their homeland.

19 All of these Resolutions date from 1993 and were adopted between April and November. Thus, they were all made in the midst of the "first" Nagorno-Karabakh war.

20 The article refers here only to a few German reflections on this topic.

21 Most recently, Luchterhandt, Otto 2021: Meinung: Das Völkerrecht und der Berg-Karabach-Konflikt, in: Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb), 7 Dec 2021, in: https://bpb.de/344244 [6 Jan 2022] with a number of further references.

22 Ibd.

23 When the two ambassadors from Azerbaijan and Armenia gave independent press conferences in November 2020, the hall of the federal press conference was almost empty, and not due to COVID-19 restrictions.

24 The term "caviar diplomacy" has been used in media coverage to describe the conspicuously positive evaluations of the domestic political situation in Azerbaijan by particular members or former members of the German Bundestag over the past ten years or so. Money from Azerbaijani sources flowed freely through various consulting firms. The discussion culminated in the spring of 2021 in the context of the "Mask Affair", in which representatives collected high commissions through brokering protective masks. Some of these representatives were involved in both events. The topic of "caviar diplomacy" disappeared again from the public eye as the election campaign heated up, without any serious consequences.

25 Thus, on 7 Dec 2012, the Working Group for Foreign Policy of the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group in the Bundestag, under its then spokesman Philipp Mißfelder († 2015), adopted a position paper. With exclusive reference to the four UN Resolutions from 1993 and with complete ignorance of any international legal discussion beyond that scope, a clearly pro-Azerbaijani position was taken. Particularly confusing was also that the position paper was first known by the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry and only two weeks later mentioned in the German media.

The designated contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editorial team.

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