KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG 4|2024

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

Under the Radar

The World's Forgotten Crises

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Dear Readers,

Hamas' attack on Israel and its ramifications, as well as Russia's war against Ukraine, have shaped foreign policy discussions in Germany in the last two years. There are reasons for this: the attack on Israel, in October 2023, hit a state for whose security our country quite rightly feels particularly responsible. In turn, Russia's attack on Ukraine poses a direct threat to the security of Germany and Europe. Both states, Israel and Ukraine, are confronted with adversaries that threaten their very existence.

Nevertheless, it is important not to lose sight of other crises. Even conflicts that have flown under the radar for years can suddenly and unexpectedly escalate again or take new turns, as the recent example of Syria has clearly shown. "Crises don't just go away," says Afghanistan expert Ellinor Zeino in this issue of International Reports. In fact, they are numerous and multifaceted. This starts with internal conflicts, which often become enormously complex due to the interference of external parties. One example of this is the conflict in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which Jakob Kerstan analyses in his article. The spectrum continues with the threat posed by terrorists and with homegrown humanitarian crises, as outlined by Maximilian Strobel with regard to Cuba. And it extends to the security-related impact of climate change. Frederick Kliem and Timm Anton elaborate on this in their text on South Asia.

The question of how Germany, jointly with its partners, can effectively defend its interests in international crises in future therefore remains on the agenda. One institutional expression of this insight is the Study Commission set up by the German parliament in summer 2022 with the task of drawing lessons for future German participation in international crisis missions from the 20-year deployment in Afghanistan. The Commission's final report is still pending. However, it is clear that considerable efforts are needed in Germany to bridge the disparity between our goals and the resources available – one could also say: the glaring gap between the aspirations and reality of German foreign policy.

These resources include the clout of the German armed forces, the Bundeswehr, and the strength of the German economy. While some progress has been made

since 2022 in terms of the Bundeswehr's operational readiness, this is nowhere near enough; especially as NATO's two per cent target, which has only been achieved sporadically to date, is likely to be obsolete with Donald Trump returning to the White House. And the economy? Pessimism currently prevails there. Yet, without a modern Bundeswehr and a strong economy, German foreign policy lacks important levers of influence. In many cases, it sees itself reduced to moral appeals and references to international law, which, however, is not capable of ending crises and wars on its own, as emphasised by Franziska Rinke and Philipp Bremer in their article.

In addition to these tangible resources, there has also been a lack of an intangible resource, namely the ability to think strategically. The symptoms: wishful thinking and an overemphasis on good intentions while neglecting the actual consequences of one's own policies. To remedy this deficiency is as difficult as it is important. A sensible proposal in this context is the establishment of a National Security Council, as exists in many other countries. While such a body is by no means a panacea, it could be suitable for guaranteeing a holistic approach to our foreign policy.

In order to correct the imbalance between aspiration and reality described above, our objectives and standards also need to be readjusted. This should result in clear prioritisation and self-restraint on several levels. Firstly, this concerns the question of where we get involved. It is tempting to react to every crisis with the demand: Germany must do something about this! But the truth is: Germany alone, but also Europe or even the political West as a whole, do not have the strength or the will to intervene decisively in every crisis in the world.

For the foreseeable future, priority will be given to national and collective defence. Beyond this, the focus for Germany should be on its immediate European neighbourhood and securing important trade routes. Even here, Germany and Europe are currently reaching the limits of their military and political capacities. This is illustrated in the articles by Jakov Devčić and Daniel Braun on the Kosovo conflict and by Stephan Malerius on the various crises in the

South Caucasus, as well as by Germany's difficulties in providing the EU mission with the appropriate warships on a permanent basis in order to protect the trade route through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Meanwhile, there will always be crises and conflicts that rightly outrage us, but which do not directly affect our core interests. In their article, Moritz Fink and Saw Kyaw Zin Khay impressively describe the courageous struggle of many citizens against the military junta in Myanmar, which stole the 2020 election from them in a coup and has been waging war against its own people ever since. To be honest, however, Germany and the EU will not play a decisive role here.

Secondly, self-restraint is also required when it comes to the question of what goals we pursue once we decide to intervene in a particular crisis. It has long been clear that comprehensive state-building missions – Afghanistan being an extreme example – have largely failed. There is much to suggest that a limitation to clearly defined objectives that affect German and European core interests could be a good concept for future commitments.

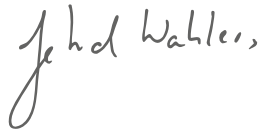
One such objective is combating terrorism. Another is the avoidance of mass migration to Europe. In their article on the war in Sudan, Steffen Krüger, Gregory Meyer and Nils Wörmer logically argue that Germany and Europe should pool their political and economic capital in an attempt to provide decent accommodation within the country or in the immediate neighbourhood for the approximately 13 million Sudanese who have been forced to leave their homes due to the conflict.

Thirdly, we should also lower our expectations when choosing counterparts who are able to exert a lasting influence on the development of crises on the ground. Only in the rarest of cases, these players will conform to our democratic and socio-political ideals, in some cases they will even be diametrically opposed to them. Nevertheless, we should at least seek dialogue where there may be overlapping interests on issues that are important to us.

And our values? These will continue to form the basis and orientation for our future actions. And we can certainly be self-confident in that respect. The German political foundations, for instance, advocate democracy, human rights and rule of law worldwide, and work together with parties and parliaments in a large number of countries. However, German and Western policies must take account of the respective historical and social context. For even if it is undoubtedly a good thing that women in Afghanistan, for example, have had better prospects and more rights for two decades, and that this experience may yet influence Afghanistan's political future, we must first recognise this: it was not sustainable. The Taliban were back twenty years after their fall in 2001. The difference between then and now is that the West is more exhausted – both militarily and politically. This does not help anybody except the enemies of the liberal values we want to defend.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,



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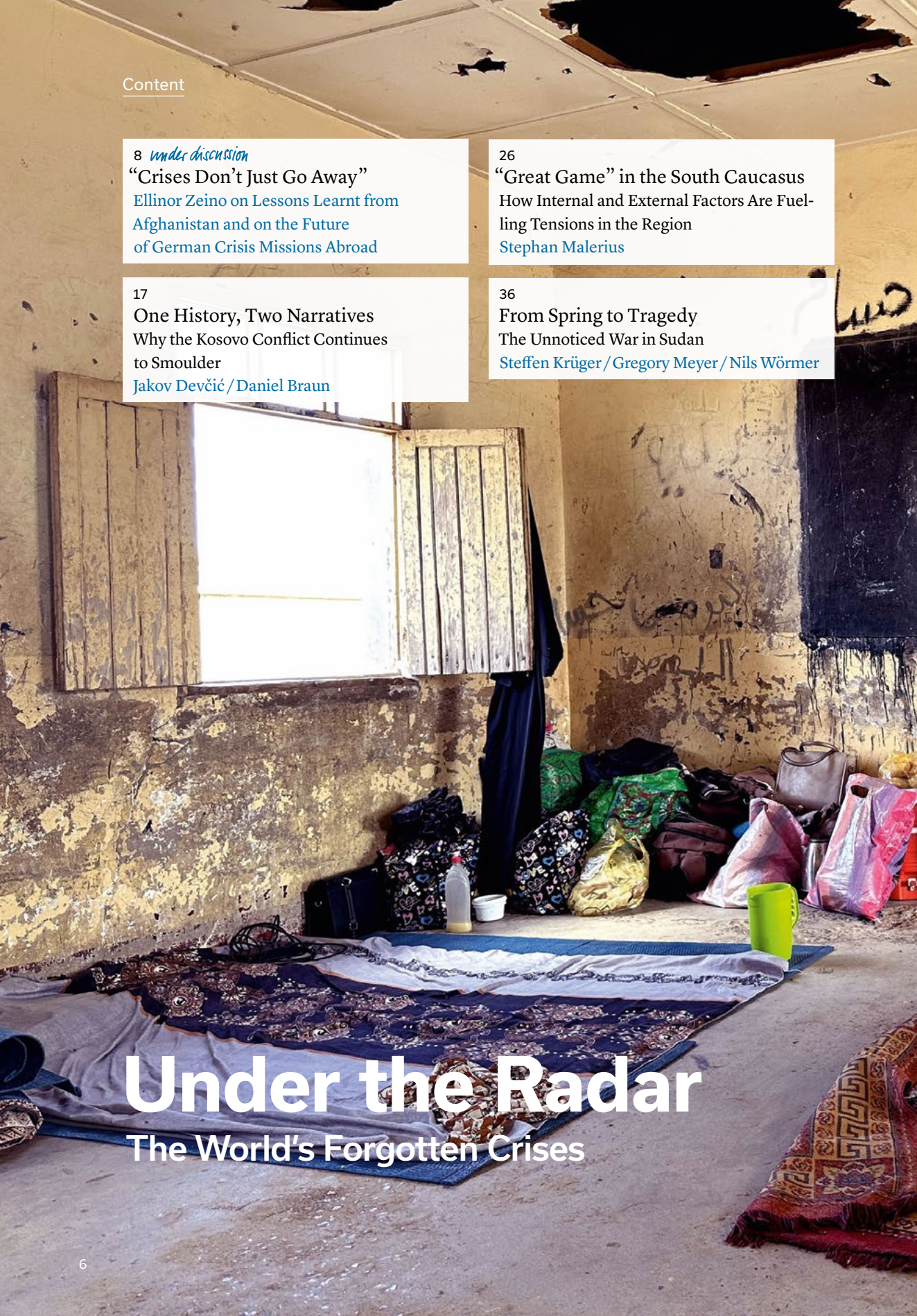


Under the Radar

The World's Forgotten Crises

From classroom to refugee shelter: In this school building in Port Sudan, people who have fled the war raging in other regions of their country have found protection. In total, around 13 million Sudanese have had to leave their homes. Photo: © Omer Erdem, AA, picture alliance.

Photo: © Hauke-Christian Dittrich, dpa, picture alliance

under discussion

Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises

"Crises Don't Just Go Away"

Ellinor Zeino on Lessons Learnt from Afghanistan and on the Future of German Crisis Missions Abroad

Dr Ellinor Zeino worked for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Afghanistan and is currently a member of a Study Commission established by the German parliament, the Bundestag, to assess the failed mission in the Hindu Kush. In an interview with International Reports, she discusses the failings of the Afghanistan mission, what can be learnt from it for future crisis operations and why Germany often wants a lot in foreign policy but ultimately achieves little.

International Reports (IR): *It was dramatic scenes that went around the world in the summer of 2021, when international troops hastily withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban regained power in the country after around 20 years. German politicians spoke of a "disaster", a "debacle", a "tragedy". At the time, you were head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Afghanistan office in Kabul. How do you recall those days?*

Ellinor Zeino: It was an incredibly intense time. At some point, you realised the clock was ticking and that it was only a matter of weeks and days. When the US said they were moving their embassy to the airport, we knew it was only a matter of hours. I had left Afghanistan the week before and was in Tashkent. My biggest concern was the safety of our employees, who were still in Kabul. My fear was not so much that the Taliban would attack us, as they no longer had a reason to do so, but that the situation would escalate overall, that Kabul would be besieged and we would experience civil war-like conditions. Practically all the armed parties to the conflict were in Kabul – so one spark could lead to an escalation.

IR: *And what happened next?*

Zeino: In retrospect, the day the Taliban seized power seems surreal to me. It was a Sunday, which is the first day of the week in Afghanistan. So we had our team meeting and I was connected digitally. In the middle of the meeting, we received the news that the Taliban were moving into the city. Within a few hours they had taken the city without encountering any resistance, but panic and traffic chaos broke out. We decided that it would be safer for our team to stay in the office for the time being.

There was only one goal for us: keep our employees safe. However, it soon became clear that none of our employees would get out via the local forces procedure, that is: the German government's aircraft. So we worked on a land evacuation. The Taliban already controlled all border crossings and roadblocks across the country. We therefore had to obtain the consent of the Taliban as well as authorisation from Pakistan. Another source of worry was our route through Nangarhar province, a stronghold of the regional branch of the so-called Islamic State. The social-democratic Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung also had local staff in Kabul and faced a similar situation. We therefore decided on a joint land evacuation. On 31 August our Afghan employees were at the

border with Pakistan. We then picked them up there together with our colleagues from the Ebert-Stiftung. The last aircraft of the US troops left Afghanistan on 1 September. We had practically made it out before the big wave of refugees.

IR: *The Afghanistan mission, which ended so hastily, has been the subject of a parliamentary Study Commission since summer 2022. As an Afghanistan expert, you are a member of this Commission. What exactly is your mandate?*

Zeino: Firstly, it is important to understand that there is also a purely parliamentary committee of inquiry. This is not the same thing. The latter only looks at the last two years of the Afghanistan mission and the evacuation, whereas we look at the entire 20 years. We analyse the military and civilian aspects of the mission. In other words, we look at the actions and cooperation of all German ministries that played a role in Afghanistan - the Ministry of Defence, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Federal Foreign Office and the Ministry of the Interior. Our mission is to draw lessons for future foreign and crisis missions. In this sense, we are not just an "Afghanistan Commission", but above all a Commission for crisis missions abroad.

Looking ahead: The Bundestag Study Commission has a mandate not only to assess the two-decades-long deployment in Afghanistan, but also to develop recommendations for future German crisis missions.
Photo: © Wolfgang Kumm, dpa, picture alliance.

IR: *Who else is on the Commission?*

Zeino: We are 22 members: 11 members of the Bundestag and 11 experts nominated by the parliamentary groups. The latter are experts from a wide range of backgrounds, including former generals of the Bundeswehr, academics, regional experts and former civilian emergency task forces. These different horizons of experience are important because a mission like the one in Afghanistan is so complex that no single person can cover all areas. In the Commission, we work on the basis of consensus. We try to agree on common positions. This is usually successful – if not, members or groups can also cast dissenting votes. The work is very focussed and fact-oriented. Interaction was very collegial, especially when it came to the Afghanistan reappraisal. In the second phase, we are now developing policy recommendations for Germany's future international crisis missions.

IR: *The exact translation of the Commission's name would be: "Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's Future Networked Commitment". What do we actually mean when we talk about "networked commitment" or a "networked approach"?*

Zeino: Our basic understanding is that crises must be understood holistically. The central idea is: development is only viable if security and stability are guaranteed. And security and stability are only sustainable if there is a certain level of economic and social development. Crises are complex, and overcoming them requires comprehensive approaches that combine civilian and military elements. This is why various players and ministries are involved, which have to act in a "networked" manner. Our task in the Study Commission is to assess how our networked external action – that means: stabilisation, counter-terrorism, diplomacy, economic and development cooperation, and humanitarian aid – must function more effectively and interlock in future.

IR: *Representatives of various political colours sit on the Commission. Those from the right-wing AfD, for example, have criticised that the Commission's mandate is already misguided in the sense that it only addresses the "how" of future German foreign missions, but not the "whether". What would you respond to this objection?*

Zeino: First of all: that is of course a legitimate question. However, I do not have the impression that there is a member of the Commission who categorically says that foreign or crisis missions should never take place again. I think everyone realises that Germany cannot fully withdraw in the face of manifold crises.

But it is also clear: with the return of war to Europe and the *Zeitenwende*, there is much greater focus again on national and collective defence. This has consequences for the discussion on the organisation of possible crisis missions. We will not witness another comprehensive state-building and stabilisation mission like the one in Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. There is no demand for this, neither in Germany, nor internationally.

However, we should not fool ourselves. Crises don't just go away. Developments in supposedly distant regions can also affect our security and prosperity. Regions of the world that we have never considered can suddenly become relevant to our security. Yet, the trend in current crisis missions is likely to be towards smaller stabilisation operations, comparable to the current mission in the Gulf of Aden to protect international shipping from attacks by the Islamist Houthi militia, for instance. Such missions have a clearly defined goal. In contrast, the extensive and highly ambitious multi-target missions, such as in Afghanistan, have largely failed in the past.

IR: *The Study Commission has already dealt intensively with the Afghanistan mission. What are the key findings so far? What were the main problems with the mission?*

Zeino: One major structural problem was certainly the lack of local ownership. Local ownership is the foundation for a successful foreign mission. Otherwise we will see, as happened in Afghanistan, that we are building up an aid economy and a dependent state that will collapse the day the international support ends. Afghanistan was almost entirely dependent on foreign support. The Afghan security forces, that is: the military and police, were almost 100 per cent externally financed and also dependent on US military capabilities. It is therefore not surprising that they were overrun within a few weeks and surrendered virtually without resistance when support was withdrawn.

Against this backdrop, another important question is absorption capacity, in other words: how sensibly can foreign funds actually be utilised locally. More money is not tantamount to more impact. On the contrary: at a certain point, more money can even have counter-productive effects. In Afghanistan, it was not only an unhealthy donor-recipient relationship that developed, but corruption also dramatically increased. Favouritism and misappropriation of public funds took place in all state institutions. Under the last Afghan government, there was also large-scale capital flight. We had failed to put a stop to this and demand accountability from the Afghan government, which in turn became a problem for that government's credibility. The government and the general population became increasingly estranged from one another. In the end, the system collapsed within a few weeks.

In addition, the mission had many other structural weaknesses: from a lack of clarity of objectives, poor expectation management and struggles among German ministries, to inadequate international coordination and a collective diffusion of responsibility among the numerous donors and allies.

IR: *What were the problems at operational level?*

Zeino: One weakness in foreign missions is the short posting times of task forces, for example in the Bundeswehr, but also in other areas. A short posting time simply means that you will never get to grips with the reality on the ground. What is more, separate living environments and veritable information bubbles formed, in which the different actors constantly referred to and reaffirmed each other. I call this

"information incest". The result is inadequate assessments of the situation that do not do justice to the complexity of reality.

However, it must be added that there were also accurate situation reports and information passed on by our task forces. In some cases, these were glossed over for political reasons. In the last two years of the negotiation process, the stability of the government and the resilience of the Afghan security forces were overemphasised, for example for reasons of supposed solidarity with the Afghan government. Shortly before the seizure of power by the Taliban, the urgency of the situation was played down in external communications in order to prevent panic. The communication of situation reports was highly politicised and sensitive on all sides.

IR: *Are there also things that you would say went well?*

Zeino: Projects that worked well were those with local roots, projects in which foreign organisations took a backseat as much as possible and did not interfere with foreign values. This leads us to the oft-cited catchphrase "value-oriented foreign policy". Values are indeed good and important for the foundation of foreign and development policy. The crux of the matter is *how* you do it and how you understand your role. Do we want to lecture other societies and export our own ideas? Or, can a mutual, respectful exchange arise? There is also a risk that the more we focus on certain target groups such as women and minorities and publicise this, the more we endanger them. The explicit promotion of these groups can then be seen locally as an expression of a "foreign agenda".

That means it is all about the how – projects must offer the local population tangible added value and be tailored towards local needs. They should be culturally sensitive, taking the specific context into account. And they should place local ownership at the centre. Projects designed in this way were successful; a few still exist today under the Taliban. One example is development projects that have involved local tribal representatives on the ground, for example in the area of resource management and dealing with climate change in agriculture.

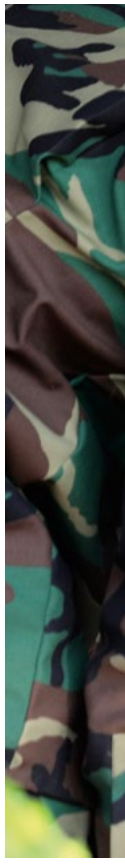
IR: *If we go back in time to 2001, just before the start of the Afghanistan mission: knowing what we know today – what would we do differently?*

Zeino: That is of course speculative. It is clear that the mission was associated with expectations that were far too high, goals that were far too ambitious and promises that were far too grand. In hindsight, it would probably have been better to concentrate on the fight against Al-Qaeda as opposed to pursuing such an ambitious state-building project without a defined end state. And there was also a relatively broad consensus on one point in the public hearings of the Study Commission: it was a cardinal error not to involve the Taliban in a negotiation or peace process from the outset after the fall of their regime in 2001. They were thought to be defeated and politically irrelevant. When the Taliban were able to regroup as an insurgent movement as early as 2003, we underestimated their power base and their support among the population.

IR: *After all you have learnt from your work in the Commission and your time in Afghanistan, where do you think Germany's greatest weaknesses lie when it comes to issues such as crisis response or strategic foresight?*

Zeino: For too long, we have been hiding behind the United States or have outsourced our security to the US. Germany felt quite comfortable in the role of civilian power. We were reluctant to take responsibility for the more robust tasks.

This has also led to a glaring lack of strategic thinking and a strategic culture in our country. Geopolitical study programmes represent a niche in the German academic landscape. Small countries such as Norway and Sweden have leading think-tanks in this area, while Germany lags far behind. With the *Zeitenwende*, this has at least improved such that defence policy issues are being discussed more prominently in the media than before. Nevertheless, I am under the impression that the pressure to act has not yet reached everyone. It still needs to sink in that we must now make structural changes to become crisis-proof. This is certainly due to political and ideological characteristics that people do not leave behind so easily and which are expressed in a reflex-like scepticism towards assuming military responsibility. Even the expression "fit for war", used by the German Defence Minister, is controversial for many. And, of course, it is also simply the case that changes take time because democratic processes take time.



IR: *Other countries, including democracies, are doing better in this respect...*

Zeino: Yes, many countries take a much more pragmatic approach to foreign and security policy. The US is certainly far ahead. For example, it has established a low-level political dialogue with the Taliban on the subject of combating terrorism and drugs. Even if they are not happy with the current situation, the neighbouring countries are in contact with the new regime in order to clarify issues relating to border security, trade and the movement of goods, or water and resource management. Germany, on the other hand, is even refusing political talks and contacts at the working level. Interest-led politics – not to be confused with power politics – has become increasingly marginalised in our country. We now have a very moralistic view of politics. We have to find the right balance again. Sometimes we don't think in terms of results. So to say: that is the result we strive for and we will find a way to achieve it. I would like to see a realistic view of foreign policy. It will probably take an even greater crisis for this change to come about.

IR: *All this sounds rather sceptical and not very encouraging. Is there anything you would say: that is a real strength for Germany in terms of foreign and development policy?*

Zeino: We were a highly esteemed international partner for a long time. We do not have the same colonial past as other states, and we have not been accused of having hidden agendas. But for many years, I have seen this positive image crumble – even before the current war in Gaza. We have long encountered increasing resistance in development cooperation. Countries in which we operate are increasingly unwilling to let the West tell them how they should live and how they should

develop. They don't want that kind of interference. And unlike in the past, they now have a much wider choice of partners, whether in the security sector or in development cooperation – China, of course, but also countries such as India, Qatar or Turkey. The "donor markets" are much more diverse today. This makes a more pragmatic approach all the more necessary.

IR: *You said earlier that Germany lacks a strategic culture and struggles to think in terms of results. What is more, many things take a very long time. One institutional change that is repeatedly proposed to make German foreign policy more stringent and quicker to act is the establishment of a so-called National Security Council. This was also discussed in the Study Commission. What do you think of such a council? And what would be its exact function?*

Zeino: The idea behind it is right. We need a body with a sufficient mandate to coordinate cooperation between the various ministries in light of an overarching strategy, to develop situation analyses and scenarios and draw up decision

To talk or not to talk? While other Western states are conducting low-level talks with the Taliban on certain issues, the German government has so far refrained from such contacts, even at working level. The picture shows the Taliban's Acting Minister of Defence, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, in August 2024.
Photo: © Siddiqullah Alizai, AP, picture alliance.

papers. It would make sense to establish such a body, in which, as in the Study Commission, independent experts should also be represented, in the Chancellery. It is important that a National Security Council can act independently of day-to-day politics. The members of the Council must be able to make their assessments without political pressure. Situation analyses and crisis scenarios need to be free from political ideology and world view. Many countries have a security council. With its many ministries and decentralised government, our country currently lacks a place where information flow together. A National Security Council could be such a place, but it won't solve all the problems.

IR: *Speaking of information and situation assessment: what role can political foundations play in this context?*

Zeino: I think the political foundations have a kind of seismograph function, which is becoming increasingly important for recognising change, and not just in crisis-stricken countries. We have the advantage of a global presence, while also being able to maintain contacts in the respective societies in a way our diplomatic missions can't. Thanks to our local staff, we are deeply rooted in everyday local life and reach people in places where diplomats can no longer go. In times of political crisis or difficult local contexts, political foundations can perhaps still build a bridge, maintain contacts and, above all, reflect local perspectives and concerns back to Berlin. This is an essential function that is also recognised by the Study Commission.

The interview was conducted by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.

Dr Ellinor Zeino is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in Turkey. From September 2018 to August 2021, she was Head of the foundation's office in Afghanistan. Since September 2022, she has been a member of the German Bundestag's Study Commission Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's Future Networked Commitment.

Photo: © Boris Grdanoski, AP, picture alliance.

Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises

One History, Two Narratives

Why the Kosovo Conflict Continues to Smoulder

Jakov Devčić / Daniel Braun

The tense situation in the region results from a century-long conflict between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. For some, the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1389[1] was a painful defeat for Serbian national heroes against the Ottoman invaders; for others, it was just one of many events in their own history. For some, the NATO intervention of 1999 was a blessing and a starting point for achieving independence, while for others it was an act of aggression against a sovereign country in violation of international law. As is so often the case, black-and-white thinking is inadequate in this conflict. Rather, shades of grey best describe the responsibility for the current situation.

Historical Context

When asked about the difficult political conditions in the Western Balkans, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill is said to have remarked in the mid-20th century that the Balkans produce more history than they can consume.[2] The conflict in and around Kosovo has deep roots, too. Throughout history, the region has been the target of migratory movements and conquests. Slavic immigration into the region between the 7th and 8th centuries marginalised and fragmented the Albanian settlement areas; at least this is how it was perceived by the latter. For the Serbs, on the other hand, Kosovo became the cradle of their nation and Christian Orthodox identity.

The Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389 was a regional turning point. With the defeat of the Serbs, the Ottoman Empire dominated the Western Balkans for several centuries. The majority of Albanians in Kosovo became Muslims, which created an additional social dividing line alongside the language. With the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the reorganisation of Europe at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and the two world wars, Belgrade gained control of what is now Kosovo, even though the Albanian population remained in the majority. Both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Tito's socialist Yugoslavia saw themselves as a construct of the southern Slavs, as expressed in the state name Yugoslavia (*Jug* means south in the Slavic languages). The term Yugoslavia therefore did not specifically include Albanians as non-Slavs.

Although Kosovo was granted the status of an autonomous region within the Republic of Serbia, it was politically dominated by Serbs until the 1990s. Similar to the situation in the other republics of Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s, the Albanians in Kosovo also demanded more political autonomy.

Slobodan Milošević's takeover of the communist party leadership in Serbia in 1987 heralded a radical change of course. A policy of discrimination began against the still majority Albanian population in Kosovo, and the situation became increasingly tense. The Kosovo Albanians boycotted the Yugoslav institutions in the autonomous province of Kosovo and gradually built up a parallel institutional system, including in the field of education. The passive resistance movement, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and led by the writer and pacifist Ibrahim Rugova and his party Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës (LDK), called for equal rights and, for the first time, independence.

In the 1990s, this approach was superseded by a militant strategy owing to the increasing oppression of the Kosovo Albanians. This is

how the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) came into being. For the majority of Albanians, it was indeed a liberation army, while for the Serbian side, it was a terrorist organisation. Between 1996 and 1999, the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army, police and paramilitaries carried out an anti-guerrilla operation in Kosovo. For the Albanians there and most of the international community, this operation was reminiscent of ethnic cleansing during the Yugoslav wars of 1991 to 1995. War crimes were committed on both sides, with Serbia being the focus of the international community due to its history in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Croatia. According to the UN refugee organisation UNHCR, 850,000 Kosovo Albanians fled to Albania and Macedonia as a result of this armed conflict.[3]

NATO intervened on 24 March 1999 with three months of air strikes that were not covered by a UN Security Council mandate. The debates in NATO and the member states were controversial. The debate over the deployment of NATO troops and airforce in Yugoslavia was particularly heated in Germany. Apart from the lack of a UN mandate, the deployment of German armed forces in the Western Balkans was highly controversial in itself in view of the history of the Second World War. The intervention was intended to use military power to force Yugoslavia to halt its operation in Kosovo. After the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, another war crime of this kind was to be prevented. The war in the then Serbian province of Kosovo ended with the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement between Yugoslavia and NATO on 9 June 1999. This provided for the immediate withdrawal of Serbian police and military forces from Kosovo. In fact, Serbia lost direct control of Kosovo that day. The United Nations established an interim administration (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK) for political stabilisation.[4] In addition, the Kosovo Force (KFOR) was deployed as an international peacekeeping force in the province. On 10 June 1999, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which defined the mandates of KFOR and UNMIK and confirmed Yugoslavia's sovereignty over Kosovo.

More than 164,000 Serbs and 25,000 Roma[5] fled Kosovo through fear of persecution by the Kosovo Albanians.[6] In August 2009, there were still 209,000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo in Serbia, both from the 1990s and from subsequent anti-Serbian riots.[7] In contrast, more than 90 per cent of Albanian refugees had returned to Kosovo by August 1999. The situation there remained difficult and tense over the years. Shortly after the end of the war, a total of 48,000 soldiers were deployed, including 8,000 from Germany alone. Nevertheless, violent clashes between Serbs and Albanians occurred time and again. In this context, 2004 was a defining year for Serbia. During violent riots by Albanians against Serbian monasteries, civilians and institutions, KFOR was unable to control the situation. Twenty-seven people died. Fear and mistrust remained.

Belgrade viewed Kosovo's declaration of independence as a violation of the UN Charter.

Developments since Kosovo's Declaration of Independence

On 17 February 2008, Kosovo declared itself independent with strong support of the US, the UK, Germany, France and other EU member states. However, for domestic political reasons, Slovakia, Romania, Cyprus, Spain and Greece still do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state.[8] An additional challenge for further international recognition is that Russia and China, two veto powers in the UN Security Council, are also refusing to recognise it. Both states are important allies for Serbia in its efforts to question Kosovo's sovereignty.

For the Kosovo Albanians, the long-cherished desire for their own state was fulfilled in 2008. Belgrade, on the other hand, saw the declaration of independence as a violation of the UN Charter. That same year, Serbia appealed to the International Court of Justice to clarify the

legality of the declaration of independence. On 22 June 2010, the Court ruled that it was compatible with international law.[9] However, it did not comment on whether Kosovo is an independent state. The status of the former Yugoslav region is therefore still unresolved for the Serbian government and opponents of Kosovan independence. In contrast, Pristina and its international partners believe that the recognition of more than 104 states has created new facts on the ground and thus confirmed Kosovo's sovereignty.

A dialogue process moderated by the EU was initiated in 2011 to solve the everyday problems of people on both sides.

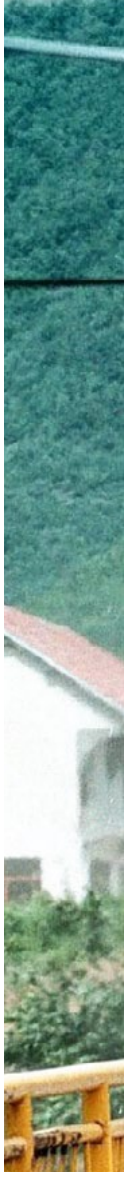
For Serbia, the lack of a UN Security Council decision on the intervention, and the declaration of independence continue to blatantly violate international legal norms and resolutions, such as the UN Charter and UN Resolution 1244. This circumstance also favours the strengthening of anti-Western attitudes in Serbian society.

Given the many unresolved political issues and those that affect people's everyday lives on both sides, a dialogue process moderated by the EU was initiated in 2011. The aim of the first "technical" phase was to facilitate communication and interpersonal exchange. Operational issues such as conducting negotiations, moderation and the binding nature of agreements were clarified without addressing the issue of Kosovo's legal status. Successes were achieved in a short period of time, such as the restoration of trade relations. Two years later, a political breakthrough was achieved with the Brussels Agreement.[10] Despite fundamental political differences, both parties managed to agree on substantial steps towards normalisation. It should be emphasised that, at that time, EU membership over the medium and long term seemed within reach for both sides. The EU saw the settlement of the conflict as a prerequisite for the European path of both parties. As a result, there was great interest on both sides in finding solutions.

Shortly after independence, Kosovo was a state with a decidedly pro-European and pro-Western population. On the other side, Aleksandar Vučić, the current President of Serbia, was a new political figure at the time and sought close ties with the European Union. Despite his background in the nationalist Serbian Radical Party, he had succeeded in founding a new pro-European political force, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Hashim Thaçi, one of the former leaders of the KLA and then President of Kosovo, had transformed himself from a guerrilla fighter into a modern European decision-maker with a sense for negotiation processes.

In essence, the Brussels Agreement provided a pathway for integration of Serbs into Kosovo institutions and for gradual dismantling of those Serbian institutions in Kosovo which had remained after 1999 in areas where Serbs were the majority, particularly in the North. Serbian police officers, judges and administrative officials were to work in Kosovan institutions from now on. Serbs were to participate in Kosovan elections and become part of the Kosovan political system. In return, an Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM) was to be established with the intention of granting the Serbian population autonomy in certain matters.

With the integration of the Serbian police and judiciary into the respective Kosovan state bodies, one of the conditions of the agreement has been fulfilled. Furthermore, according to the Kosovan constitution, ten of the 120 seats in the Kosovan parliament are guaranteed for the Serb minority regardless of the election result. The fact that Kosovo has yet to establish ASM, which is one of the central demands of the Brussels Agreement, is the main reason for the existing mistrust among Kosovo Serbs towards the government in Pristina. In addition, the prospects of EU membership have become increasingly distant for both sides. The reasons for this lie



In action: NATO helicopters are seen landing on a bridge in Kosovo in June 1999. The Western alliance had previously carried out air strikes against Serbia lasting several months. Photo: © Antonio Bat, epa, picture alliance.

in the rise of nationalism in both Serbia and Kosovo, economic problems, the absence of reforms and a lack of interest on the part of the EU.

Serbian Majority Communities in Northern Kosovo

The Serbian population in South Kosovo is organised in enclaves surrounded by Albanian villages and towns. By contrast, the Serbian population in northern Kosovo borders on Serbia. In four municipalities, Serbs make up the absolute majority of inhabitants. Between the withdrawal of the Serbian security forces in 1999 and the Brussels Agreement, Serbian institutions, such as hospitals, schools, courts and local self-governments, continued to be present in northern Kosovo. The employees received their salaries from Belgrade. It was tolerated that Pristina provided the energy supply and that the Serbian population did not pay any bills. The Kosovan state was not present. After signing the Brussels Agreement, the key political representation of the Serbs in Kosovo, the Srpska Lista party, was founded with strong support

from Belgrade. The political parties of the Serbs that had existed until then and were opposed to the Brussels Agreement, were marginalised. The police, courts and political representation of the Serbs at local and national level were integrated into the Kosovan system.

The unstable security situation in Kosovo is a risk for Europe.

In view of the standstill in the EU-led normalisation process, the US under Donald Trump proposed a territorial exchange to both parties in 2018. This was an absolute novelty, as the territorial integrity of Kosovo had not been questioned by the US until then. This proposal was immediately rejected at EU level. The Washington Agreement was signed in 2020 by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the then Kosovan Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, but was never fully implemented. It remains to be seen whether Donald Trump's administration will launch new initiatives in his second term.

New Momentum for Dialogue Due to Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

In the wake of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, strategic interest in the Western Balkans and thus also in relations between Serbia and Kosovo has grown. The unstable security situation, particularly in northern Kosovo, was and continues to be a security risk for Europe. Large portions of its military, political and financial

Tense situation: In September 2023, police officers secure a street in the town of Banjska in northern Kosovo, known for its monastery. Serbian paramilitaries had previously engaged in a firefight with Kosovo security forces there. Photo: © Visar Kryeziu, AP, picture alliance.

resources are earmarked for supporting Ukraine. Western allies are concerned that Russia could use its good relations with nationalist segments of the Serbian population in Kosovo and parts of the security institutions in Serbia to destabilise northern Kosovo. A second active conflict in Europe would most likely overstretch the West's resources.

In light of these circumstances, the normalisation process between Serbia and Kosovo was resumed from summer 2022. In coordination with the US and other Western partners, Germany and France presented a further normalisation agreement based on the 1972 Basic Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Both the Kosovan Prime Minister and the Serbian President verbally agreed to accept the agreement on 27 February 2023.[11] The annex on implementation (Ohrid Agreement)[12], signed a month later by Prime Minister Albin Kurti, but which Vučić only agreed to verbally, set out the details of the proposed Franco-German plan. That the EU was unable to convince both sides to sign the documents highlights both the mistrust between Vučić and Kurti and the West's limited opportunities to exert pressure.

In 2023, political tensions led to violent clashes.

The negotiating framework has changed fundamentally compared to 2011. While there was only talk of standards at the start of the normalisation process, "de facto recognition" and the implementation of all agreements already signed are now key conditions in the EU accession process of both states.[13] Domestic political resistance in Serbia continues to prevent decision-makers from implementing the Franco-German (or European) proposal. In turn, Kosovo began to adopt unilateral measures to strengthen its statehood in the north. Among other things, it banned Serbian licence plates on cars, taxes and utility bills were enforced in northern Kosovo, and Serbian banks and post offices were closed. In addition, the police used force to install mayors who had been elected in local elections in 2023 with a voter turnout of 3.5 per cent. The Serbs did not take part in the elections because they felt discriminated against.

These political tensions led to violent clashes. In May 2023, dozens of soldiers were injured in clashes between Serbs and KFOR troops and Kosovan special police. On 23 September, a group of Serbian paramilitaries led by Milan Radojičić, who had been the political leader of the Serbs in Kosovo until then, engaged in a firefight with the Kosovo police that lasted for hours and resulted in the deaths of three Serbs and one Kosovo Albanian policeman. The government in Pristina assumes that this group was a vanguard of "green men" whose aim was to pave the way for an official intervention by the Serbian army. Serbia, on the other hand, denies this and claims that the armed Serbs acted with complete independence. According to the Serbian side, this escalation is solely due to the threatening situation for Serbs in northern Kosovo.

Radojičić and around 50 other attackers fled to Serbia immediately after the incident. Kosovo calls for the extradition of Radojičić and has intensified the increasingly repressive measures to push back Serbian influence in northern Kosovo. The exact circumstances of the incident in September 2023 remain unclear to the public. Since the incident, Serbia's relations with Kosovo have been largely constructive. Among other things, Serbia has now recognised Kosovan vehicle registration plates, which makes daily life easier on both sides.

Prospects for a Normalisation of Bilateral Relations

Policymakers in both Serbia and Kosovo have insufficient interest in a sustainable solution to the conflict. Political compromises are seen as weakness on both sides. Neither society has a stable majority in favour of normalising relations in the sense that both sides would have to make far-reaching concessions. This complicates international efforts.

Due to their experience with NATO attacks, the majority of Serbian society is critical of NATO and the leading Western countries. Kosovo, on the other hand, fears that compromising could jeopardise its sovereignty. The existing Serbian institutions in Kosovo, the Srpska Lista and a future ASM are seen as possible bridgeheads for a Serbian invasion. In Kosovo, the comparison with Republika Srpska, one of the two state entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is repeatedly used to reject ASM. However, this discussion ignores the fact that Republika Srpska makes up 49 per cent of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Kosovo, on the other hand, Serbs only live on 15.6 per cent of the territory. What is more, on the basis of the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), the Republika Srpska has more far-reaching executive powers than those envisaged for ASM. The international partners EU and US, which call for the establishment of ASM, also see no parallels with Republika Srpska and demand the implementation of what has been agreed in the treaty. Nevertheless, the fears in Kosovo that the ASM has the potential to be a gateway for separatism and functional paralysis of the Kosovar state are not just politically constructed lines of argument.

Great expectations are being placed on the new European Commission.

With the Russian war against Ukraine, geopolitical considerations have taken on a new significance. Serbia has voted in favour of Ukraine in all key United Nations votes to condemn the war. Yet, Belgrade is not participating in the EU's sanctions against Russia due to its own experience with sanctions and embargoes in the 1990s. Kosovo, on the other hand, supports the sanctions and has harmonised its foreign policy with the EU. Despite the widespread belief that Serbia is aligned with Russia in terms of foreign and security policy, Serbia has proven to be a reliable supporter of Ukraine in the military sphere. Through this support and a constructive approach to the normalisation process, Serbia also received further support from the West. Conversely, Kosovo considers it unfair that the EU is sympathetic towards Serbia, which in Kosovo's view is an ally of Putin in Europe.

Pristina's application to join the Council of Europe in May 2024 also failed due to the uncompromising stance of the left-wing nationalist government under Albin Kurti, which was characterised by constant uncoordinated attempts to reduce Serbian influence in northern Kosovo. The longer the government under Kurti pursues this strategy, the less it will be trusted by its most important Western partners, the US and Germany.

On the other hand, the political leadership in Belgrade is convinced that Kosovo is using the war in Ukraine to change facts on the ground, especially in northern Kosovo, and to minimise Serbian influence there. Although understandable against the backdrop of its national interests, Kosovo's measures are characterised by increasing repression, as reflected in the establishment of new police stations, for example. Reports that properties belonging to monasteries or cemeteries have been expropriated in order to establish bases for the Kosovan police have been met with bewilderment.[14] This intimidates the Serbian population in many places. For the Kosovo Serbs, many of the actions of the government in Pristina are a repetition, in reverse, of the failed violent policy against the Albanians in the early years of Slobodan Milošević. Whereas the government in Pristina sees itself as a victim of Serbian reprisals and would like to see its statehood secured across the entire territory.

With regard to the future of the EU-led normalisation process, great expectations are being placed on the new European Commission. Recently, Pristina has expressed increasing reservations about Miroslav Lajčák, the EU's current chief negotiator in the normalisation process, and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell. Both were the main players in the Western mediation process. However, both come from EU member states that have not yet recognised Kosovo. As a

result, representatives of the Kosovan government repeatedly questioned the integrity of both top diplomats, which further hindered the progress of the normalisation process.

Accordingly, there is an expectation that the new Commission will provide new impetus to revitalise the talks. It is in Brussels' vital interest to once again attach greater importance to dialogue and make rapid progress. In this context, the outcome of the US presidential elections has been eagerly awaited both in Serbia and in Kosovo. Donald Trump's attempt to negotiate a deal in his first term in office has given rise to widespread hope in Belgrade and concern in Pristina about his second term in office. The progress of the bilateral relationship between Belgrade and Pristina will strongly influence regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in the future. If both sides block each other in regional forums for cooperation, such as the Berlin Process, then the entire regional cooperation will be undermined.

Despite many setbacks since the start of the talks between Serbia and Kosovo, there have been numerous improvements in the everyday lives of people on both sides. Belgrade and Pristina must recognise the realities so that stable peace can be achieved. The Serbs in Kosovo must accept that they are part of the majority Albanian-Kosovan society and that the country can no longer be part of Serbia. For their part, the political decision-makers in Kosovo, as well as the majority of the population, must show a genuine interest in working together. Only if Kosovo is realised as a multi-ethnic country will the Western Balkans as a whole be permanently stabilised.

– translated from German –

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Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises

"Great Game" in the South Caucasus

How Internal and External Factors Are Fuelling Tensions in the Region

Stephan Malerius

Scarcely any other region is so directly impacted by the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East as the South Caucasus. It is as if they have plunged Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia into a permanent crisis mode, after years of "stagnant stability" had already been shaken in 2020 with the second Nagorno-Karabakh war[1]. Since then, the South Caucasus has been in a state of unrest. The causes are complex, the landscape of players is confusing, and forecasts would require a crystal ball.

From Frozen to Hot: Unresolved Conflicts in the South Caucasus

In summer 2020, the European Commission launched an ambitious programme called "EU4Dialogue". It addressed the unresolved conflict in the Transnistria region of Moldova, but above all, it was devoted to the South Caucasus. The territorial conflicts there had been considered to be virtually frozen for almost 30 years, and international negotiation formats had practically failed. In Georgia, two regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are de facto occupied by Russia. In Azerbaijan, the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh was inhabited almost exclusively by ethnic Armenians. At the same time, internationally, it was recognised as part of Azerbaijan. The aim of EU4Dialogue was to help transform these conflicts, reduce tensions and promote better understanding between people across the lines of conflict.[2] Nobody in Brussels had thought that, three months later, the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev would decide to attack the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. The second Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in autumn 2020 lasted 44 days, claimed around 7,000 victims and brought a third of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh under Azerbaijani control. It was one of the first drone wars of the 21st century, which, in retrospect, looks like a blueprint for what the world is currently witnessing on a much larger scale in the war between Russia and Ukraine.

The ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh region initiated by Russia in November 2020 never really held. In September 2022, Azerbaijan attacked Armenian territory. More than 300 soldiers were killed in three days. This was followed in December 2022 by a months-long blockade of the part of Nagorno-Karabakh that was still populated by Armenians, and in September 2023 Azerbaijan gained complete control of the region in a one-day blitz operation. This led to more than 100,000 people fleeing from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, which, surprisingly, did not lead to lasting domestic political destabilisation.

The events in the South Caucasus from 2020 onwards show three things. Firstly: supposedly frozen or unresolved conflicts can quickly thaw and escalate into hot wars with unforeseeable consequences. Secondly: authoritarian rulers have little or no respect for international law or regulatory institutions and regard violence or war as an effective means of resolving conflict. This was true for Ilham Aliyev, and applied to Vladimir Putin, before 2020 and especially afterwards. Thirdly: the conflicts in the South Caucasus represent a comprehensive political and diplomatic failure on the part of the international community, both in the form of individual parties or states as well as international organisations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or the United Nations. Given that the OSCE Minsk Group, founded in 1992 to settle the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh under the leadership of France, Russia and the US, was unable to achieve any results in almost 30 years, Azerbaijan decided to resolve the conflict by

military force in 2020.[3] The virtual absence of decisive international reactions to Aliyev's violent actions was in turn closely monitored in the Kremlin and may have encouraged Putin's actions in Ukraine a year and a half later.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has played a destructive role in virtually all wars and crises in the region.

The situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues to be fragile even after Azerbaijan's complete capture of Nagorno-Karabakh and the exodus of Armenians. In Armenia there are fears that Azerbaijan could exploit its military superiority and force further concessions, such as extraterritorial access to its exclave of Nakhchivan via Armenian territory. Aliyev's aggressive rhetoric fuels these fears.[4] This prompted Armenia, which had previously been unilaterally and almost exclusively dependent on Russia, to reduce the military imbalance vis-à-vis Azerbaijan by diversifying its arms purchases, particularly in India and France. This, in turn, has caused great suspicion in Baku, prompting statements about Azerbaijan responding with "serious measures" in the event of a "serious threat".[5]

So a new arms race is emerging in the South Caucasus between two countries that are already among the most militarised states in the world.[6] At the same time, Baku and Yerevan have been trying to negotiate a peace treaty for months, with some recent progress on issues such as the exchange of territory and border demarcation. However, this does not mean that an agreement will soon be ready to be signed. The dynamics of the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan resemble a rollercoaster ride[7], with Russia invariably causing the downward spiral. Aliyev in particular seems to be urged by Moscow not to sign a peace agreement or to delay this process for as long as possible.[8] There is even speculation that Russia is trying to pressure Azerbaijan into further military action against Armenia so as to give Moscow and Baku control over transport routes in southern Armenia, while also weakening the Armenian government and allowing Russia to regain more domestic political influence in Armenia.[9] Moscow does not hide the fact that it is unhappy about Armenia turning to other partners, and openly and repeatedly threatens the government in Yerevan with a Ukrainian scenario.[10]

Currently, Armenia and Azerbaijan are conducting bilateral negotiations for the most part and, above all, with little publicity, which is favourable to the process. Should an agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan be reached in the near future, this would not yet guarantee lasting peace. However, depending on how comprehensive it is, an agreement could be an important basis for normalising political, economic and interpersonal relations and carefully building trust. Still, in light of the decades-long hostility between the two countries, it is hard to imagine that the practical implementation of that peace treaty or a reconciliation process based on it can be successful in the long term without external guarantors or a mediator, which cannot be Russia.

The "Spoiler"

Compared to the unpredictable dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflicts in Georgia seem less complicated at first glance. What is more, a pattern that has characterised the South Caucasus since the early 1990s is more apparent here: following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has directly or indirectly played a destructive role in virtually all wars and crises in the region. This happened openly, as in the war with Georgia in 2008, semi-openly, as in the support for the Abkhazian separatists in 1992/1993, or covertly, as in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in which Russia not only systematically armed both sides for 30 years, but time and again tried to actively prevent the parties from reaching an agreement.

Consistently destructive: Russia has been involved in almost every conflict in the South Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union, having also strongly fuelled the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The picture shows Vladimir Putin with Azerbaijani head of state Aliyev. Photo: © Grigory Sysoyev, dpa, picture alliance.

The logic behind it was simple: if Armenia and Azerbaijan come to terms or if Georgia gains control over its entire territory, Russia will lose its "lever of influence" in the region.

The conflicts in Georgia date back to the Georgian-Abkhazian war in 1992/1993 and the subsequent civil war in other parts of the country, as a result of which the central government in Tbilisi originally lost control over three regions (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Adjara). In 2004, President Mikheil Saakashvili succeeded in reintegrating Adjara into the Georgian state, which was prevented by Russia in the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Although the two conflicts are considered frozen, there are repeated incidents, most recently in November 2023, when Russian security forces killed a Georgian at the line of contact with South Ossetia.

While it is easy for the Kremlin to pour oil on the fire in the ethnically motivated conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the situation in Georgia was and continues to be more complicated. Already under President Eduard Shevardnadze (1992 to 2003), who consistently pursued Georgia's integration with the West, Russia had gradually lost influence over the direction of the country's foreign policy. This process accelerated during the term of office of the decidedly pro-Western President Saakashvili (2004 to 2012), who also limited the role of the Russian language in Georgian schools and the broadcasting of Russian media. In response, Russia imposed embargoes on its southern neighbour, cut off the gas supply, invaded in August 2008 and has since effectively occupied 20 per cent of Georgia's territory. In addition, Moscow created another instrument to regain influence over

the situation in Georgia from 2012 onwards with the figure of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Ivanishvili is an oligarch who made his fortune of currently around seven billion euros in Russia in the 1990s, and still has economic interests there despite claims to the contrary.[11] The Georgian Dream (GD) party that he founded won the 2012 parliamentary elections against Saakashvili and has been ruling Georgia ever since. Ivanishvili spoke out in favour of normalising relations with Russia from the outset, but it was initially difficult for his government to pursue an openly pro-Russian policy in the face of stable pro-European and pro-transatlantic public sentiment in Georgia. Still, Russia's influence in Georgia gradually increased, above all through opaque economic interests.[12] In the "Foreign Agent Law"[13], initially introduced in March 2023 and reintroduced in April 2024, numerous Russia-friendly political decisions taken by the government in recent years culminated, such as the appointment of a General State Prosecutor working for Russia, the resumption of direct flights with Russia and entry bans for Russian regime critics.

There are attempts to create an economic hub controlled by Russia, Iran and China.

The "Foreign Agent Law" sharpened a domestic political crisis that had been simmering in Georgia for a long time and which was further deepened by the parliamentary elections in October. Given the extensive and systematic falsification of the elections, the government has failed a basic democratic test. The events also suggest that the Russian infiltration of key state institutions in Georgia is much more extensive than previously assumed. This was already indicated by an election campaign in which the

Fig. 1: Conflict Regions in the South Caucasus

Source: own illustration, map: Natural Earth ©.

government pursued a narrative that it has been using to stir up sentiment in the country since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to this narrative, the West wants to drag Georgia into a war with Russia and the election in October was a choice between war (opposition) and peace (GD).

Ivanishvili himself has been stoking fears of an obscure "Global War Party" and radicalising the already irreconcilable tone in a manipulative and unobjective debate. A multi-pronged assault on electoral integrity, including unprecedented vote-buying, mass intimidation and direct manipulation led then to an election result that does not reflect the will of the Georgian people and that lacks legitimacy, as will any future Georgian government built on it.

Owing to active Russian influence via the compliant government of a dependent oligarch, Georgia is currently experiencing one of the deepest domestic political crises since its independence, which also has regional implications: if, for example, the EU were to impose sanctions on the country due to the massively rigged elections, this would also have a negative impact on the rapprochement between the EU and isolated Armenia, for which Georgia is an important "bridge" to Europe.

Axis of Upheaval or "Great Game" in the South Caucasus

In addition to the immediate conflicts, global fault lines run through the South Caucasus that indicate potential long-term crises. At the heart of this lies a systemic rivalry between repressive authoritarian and liberal-democratic states, which manifests itself in the region and sounds like a distant echo of the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. At the centre is an autocratic axis[14] that runs from Russia via Iran to China and North Korea and is challenging Western democracies and the liberal order in an increasingly aggressive way. In the South Caucasus, these four players are geographically closer to each other than perhaps anywhere else except Central Asia. In any case, they are actively trying to strengthen their cooperation here, especially in terms of infrastructure. This is not just about circumventing sanctions or breaking through political isolation, but about creating value chains, controlling transport routes and establishing new regulatory agreements (monetary systems, energy markets) over the long term.[15]

The clear goal is to create an economic hub in the South Caucasus that is comprehensively controlled by Russia, Iran and China, making it impossible for the West to track or prevent the movement of goods. This is particularly important in the case of the transport of military goods, as shown by the delivery of Iranian drones to Russia via the Caspian Sea since 2022. Against this backdrop, there is already some talk of a new "Great Game" in the South Caucasus, which entails the control of economic, logistical and military dynamics in the region that could help shape global conflicts in the future.[16]

The strategic alliance between Israel and Azerbaijan leads to tensions between Tehran and Baku.

Two specific examples illustrate the challenges for the West posed by the increased geo-economic cooperation of the autocratic axis in the South Caucasus:

- The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)[17] is advertised as a historic connectivity project that organises the movement of goods and people along an efficient transport route from Asia to Northern Europe. Despite there being talk of Central Asia's access to Western markets, it is primarily about control over transport routes, as the corridor essentially runs through Russia and Iran. The South Caucasus is a crucial bottleneck, and the integration of Armenia and Azerbaijan into the project is essential.

A further strengthening of the Russian-Iranian alliance, which is working in a coordinated manner against the West in both Ukraine and Gaza, would be unfavourable for Europe.

- Another major infrastructure project in the region is the construction of a deep-sea port in Anaklia on the Georgian Black Sea coast. The port is seen as a key element for more efficient goods transport from Asia to Europe. Developed by private investors with the help of a Western consortium until 2018, it was halted by Georgian Dream and put on ice for several years. In 2023, the Georgian government tendered out the contract again, and it was awarded in a non-transparent process to a Chinese consortium of state-owned companies that are sanctioned by the US because they belong to the "military-industrial complex" in China. As in the case of the INSTC, a port built by China would imply

Promised land or nightmare: Many Georgians have repeatedly taken to the streets to defend their country's European integration. However, for men who run the country like Soviet "thieves in law", the associated transparency and rule of law standards would be a serious business risk. Photo: © Davit Kachkachishvili, AA, picture alliance.

Beijing's control over a transport bottleneck of supra-regional importance and would also be a gateway for Russia, which occupies Georgian territory a few kilometres north of Anaklia in Abkhazia.[18]

The authoritarian protagonists' attempts to reshape the region are being disrupted by the complex network of relationships in the South Caucasus and a rivalry that certainly harbours short-term potential for conflict: at the centre of this is the strategic alliance between Israel and Azerbaijan, which was able to win the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in part thanks to modern Israeli weapons. In return, Israel obtains 40 per cent of its oil from Azerbaijan and probably uses the country as an operational base for actions against Iran. Time and again this leads to tensions between Tehran and Baku, which are further exacerbated by the fact that a large Azerbaijani minority lives in northern Iran. Iranian-Azerbaijani relations are also like a roller-coaster ride: both sides are adept at fuelling secessionist aspirations among Iranian Azerbaijanis or questioning Azerbaijan's right to exist, but then revert back to *Realpolitik*. And so bilateral relations oscillate between large-scale threatening gestures in the form of military manoeuvres on the Arax border river, like in autumn 2022, and the joint inauguration of a hydroelectric power plant on the same river in May 2024.

In this complex network of relationships, it is obvious that Armenia is seeking a close alliance with Iran and, in the event of a conflict, may not be hoping for military assistance, but at least open political support from Tehran. In contrast, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey is less clear. Turkey contributed significantly towards the outcome of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war by training the Azerbaijani military and supplying modern weapons, while also being diametrically opposed to Israel. Turkey – and this is certainly causing headaches in Brussels – will be the player to fill the vacuum that would emerge from a potentially diminishing Russian role in the South Caucasus.

"Thieves in Law"

In the post-Soviet space, many inter-state and intra-state conflicts are influenced by a little-noticed phenomenon that was and is particularly pronounced in the South Caucasus. The 1950s saw the emergence of the "Soviet criminal" based on the world of the Gulag camps and shaped by the camp system's brutal prisoner hierarchy. These so-called thieves in law (Russian: "Vory v zakone") regulated everyday life in the camps and established their own laws in a kind of parallel reality, which also extended to Soviet society outside the camps following Stalin's death. The "thieves' law" was accompanied by a rejection of state structures and a refusal to co-operate with state authorities. In this parallel world, strict codes of honour prevailed, money was earned primarily through robberies and extortion, and criminal authorities were blindly obeyed. The more the communist ideology clearly mutated into a farce, the more the state lost respect and prestige, and the more Soviet officials seemed to be exposed as liars, exploiters and manipulators, the more relentlessly the "thieves' law" moved into the centre of society.[19]

The "thieves in law" perceive European integration of their countries as a threat.

The golden era of the "thieves in law" was the 1970s under Brezhnev, but they also shaped Armenia and Georgia in the first years of independence and are still part of the public or political sphere in both countries to this day. Although the phenomenon is generally associated with the "underworld" or the mafia milieu, "thieves in law" have de facto been active in high-ranking political positions in many former Soviet republics over the past 20 years. Be it Viktor Yanukovych as President of Ukraine from 2010 to 2014, Vladimir Plahotniuc as shadow man in the Republic of Moldova from 2010 to 2019 or Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia since 2012. Ivanishvili (nickname in Russia: anaconda), is

probably the clearest copy of the Soviet pattern with his informal rule and pronounced aversion to state office.

What these 21st century "thieves in law" have in common is their resolute rejection of a European understanding of democracy, which is based on the rule of law and accountability and provides for the sharing of power or a change of power. They therefore perceive European integration of their states as a threat, and the "Foreign Agent Law" in Georgia is intended to avert precisely this. As in the Soviet Union, some "thieves in law", as represented by figures such as Aliyev, Lukashenka and Putin, have their alliance of politics and organised economic crime secured by secret services. Since they cannot abolish the state, they try to appropriate it and introduce laws that only they themselves define. In terms of foreign policy – and this seems even more serious – they reject international norms, treaties and institutions and instead strive for a world in which they try to impose their self-made, ruthless "thieves' law 2.0". In order to categorise the crises in the South Caucasus and, more broadly, in the post-Soviet space, it is important to understand the political mentality of these "thieves in law", especially in authoritarian states.

Europe's Strategic Interests in the South Caucasus

The EU has good instruments for making a sustainable contribution towards crisis prevention or conflict transformation in the region, but these are often not used consistently. The establishment of a civilian observer mission in Armenia to stabilise the situation at the borders in 2023 is a positive example of the influence the EU can actually exert on the ground when there is political will. In particular, Europe's economic engagement in the South Caucasus could be further expanded and ought to be accompanied by greater political influence.

It is important that the EU demonstrates its willingness to fully define and pursue its interest in stability and democratic development in the South Caucasus. As a study by Clingendael recommends, the focus should be on security, the economy and geopolitical as well as normative dimensions.[20] The work of EU delegations on the ground, instruments such as the European Peace Facility and the commitment of financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development play a vital role here.

Wedged between Russia, Turkey and Iran and between the Black and Caspian Seas, the supposedly peripheral region of the South Caucasus is in fact of central interest to Europe. This calls for a long-term and strategic view of the region as a whole. The formulation of an up-to-date South Caucasus strategy that clearly exceeds declarations of intent seems long overdue.

– translated from German –

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1 The first Nagorno-Karabakh war lasted from 1992 to 1994 and ended with a military success for Armenia. Between 20,000 and 30,000 people lost their lives and more than one million people were displaced.

2 This goal is to be achieved in three components with measures at the political-civil society level, the cultural-academic level and with project funding for local players. The first component, which brings together state and non-state parties across conflict lines for thematic dialogues, is being implemented by a consortium led by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

3 The Geneva International Discussions on resolving the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were set up in 2008 under the aegis of the OSCE, the EU and the UN, are just as meaningless. They took place in December 2023 for the 59th time and also have no results to show.

4 "Aliyev is unwilling to tone down the antagonistic rhetoric and move on confidence building and regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. Now, Azerbaijan claims that the entire Republic of Armenia is 'Western Azerbaijan' and Aliyev was on the record claiming Yerevan as 'historically' Azerbaijani land, and, therefore, preparing the ground for future antagonism." Cheterian, Vicken 2023: Crisis to Watch 2024: Armenia-Azerbaijan, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 21 Dec 2023, in: https://ogy.de/j7c7 [8 Oct 2024].

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7 Poghosyan, Benyamin 2024: Opinion: What drives Azerbaijani obsession with the Armenian Constitution?, commonspace.eu, 24 Jul 2024, in: https://ogy.de/apyx [8 Oct 2024].

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11 Civil Georgia 2024: Investigation Reveals Bidzina Ivanishvili's Family's Large Real Estate Holdings in Moscow, 9 Aug 2024, in: https://ogy.de/3kvp [8 Oct 2024]; Transparency International 2022: Russian Businesses of Bidzina Ivanishvili and His Relatives, 27 Apr 2022, in: https://ogy.de/5tef [8 Oct 2024].

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Photo: © Ahmed Satti, AA, picture alliance.

Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises

From Spring to Tragedy

The Unnoticed War in Sudan

Steffen Krüger / Gregory Meyer / Nils Wörmer

In less than 18 months, the war in Sudan has developed into the greatest humanitarian catastrophe of our era. At the same time, Germany and Europe are completely preoccupied with the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Nevertheless, German policymakers have an objective interest in stabilising the situation in Sudan and counteracting a further increase in migratory pressure on Europe's borders.

What began more than 18 months ago as a battle between two Sudanese military officers for control of central power in Khartoum has now not only plunged Africa's third largest territorial state into total chaos, but has also shifted the political tectonics at the crucial hinge between the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region. The countries most affected by the war in Sudan are Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Chad and Libya, which together are home to almost a quarter of Africa's total population.

The commander-in-chief of the regular Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), Lieutenant General Abdel Fatah al-Burhan, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, the commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which were formed more than 20 years ago, were unable to agree on the exact distribution of power following a brief period of joint rule. This led to the outbreak of fighting between the military and paramilitaries in the Sudanese capital on 15 April 2023. Initial hopes of a quick start to meaningful negotiations have been dashed a long time ago. The ongoing regionalisation of the conflict as a result of the intervention of numerous players, some of which have strongly divergent interests, has significantly complicated past exploratory efforts and made diplomatic solutions impossible to date. The total number of Sudanese citizens who have been forced to leave their homes since 15 April has now exceeded 13 million.[1] The humanitarian situation in Sudan has reached the scale of the Syrian catastrophe between 2015 and 2018. For German and European policy, the relevance of the situation in Sudan arises from the same geographical proximity and the same security interests that prevail with regard to the Sahel region: containing the potential for flight and migration by strengthening state and economic structures and combating non-state armed groups. However, given the focus on the conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the Sudan conflict receives little attention in European politics and public opinion.

The Military, Paramilitaries and the Brief Hope of Democracy in Sudan

Despite fears of an armed conflict between the SAF and RSF having already been reported in the weeks leading up to 15 April 2023,[2] the sudden outbreak of violence took many observers by surprise.[3] Almost four years to the day, on 11 April 2019, the current opponents, al-Burhan and Hemedti, were jointly involved in the overthrow of Sudan's long-term ruler Omar al-Bashir.[4] When a transitional government was agreed upon in July of the same year under the mediation of Ethiopia and the African Union (AU), both generals were given positions on the eleven-member "Sovereign Council", which was set to run for a three-year period.[5] In addition to the establishment of this council, chaired by al-Burhan and comprising an equal number of military officials and civilians, the politically unencumbered economist Abdalla Hamdok was appointed prime minister and a cabinet composed of representatives of the old regime as well as new figures was appointed.[6] Democratic elections were scheduled for the end of the 39-month phase, and the media reported on the

continuation of the "Arab Spring" or a new wave of it.[7] However, those hopes were frustrated due to another coup in October 2021.

The establishment of the RSF as an additional armed player proved to be fatal.

Just two years after the transitional political structures were established, the Sudanese military ended the country's fledgling democratic experiment and ousted the civilian part of the transitional government under Prime Minister Hamdok. The renewed coup on 25 October 2021 was led by General al-Burhan, who was supported primarily by the SAF, but also by the RSF led by General Hemedti.[8] Following ongoing protests by the civilian population and pressure from abroad, Hamdok was reinstated on 21 November. However, power remained almost entirely in the hands of the military and the balance between the military and civilians that had originally been agreed, failed to be restored. Time and again, the army responded to the continuing large-scale demonstrations using force. This led to the final resignation of the Prime Minister on 2 January 2022. Twelve months later, another agreement was reached for a two-year interim phase under a military government, with a subsequent handover of power to a civilian government.[9]

In the few months leading up to the outbreak of violence in April 2023, tensions within the Sudanese security apparatus steadily increased. The founding of the RSF as an additional armed player two decades earlier and its rise to become an actor on a par with the armed forces proved fatal. The long-simmering question within the security sector about the future *primus inter pares* escalated when the RSF opposed plans to integrate into the SAF. Specifically, the disagreement arose from the armed forces' demand for a complete transfer of the RSF into the regular army within 24 months, i.e. during the interim phase, while General Hemedti's organisation demanded a time horizon of ten years. After both sides had spent days preparing for a direct confrontation, the SAF ordered the RSF to evacuate certain positions in the greater Khartoum area, prompting RSF fighters to attack army facilities. On 17 April 2023, their commander-in-chief, General al-Burhan, declared the organisation of his former ally a rebel group and ordered it to disband.[10]

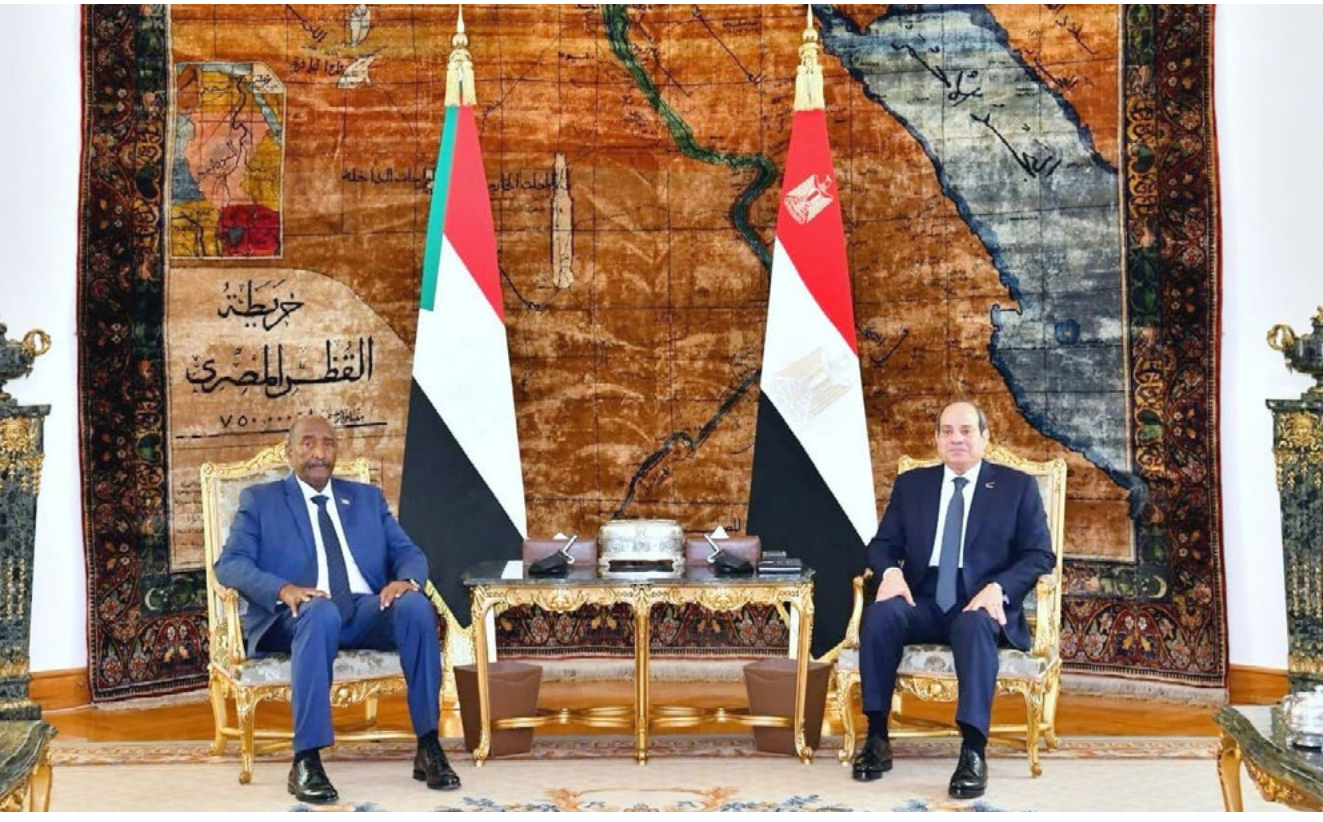
Territorial Control, Balance of Power and Dependence on Arms Supplies

Even after 20 months of intense, nationwide fighting, neither of the two main players[11] has been able to clearly gain the upper hand. The SAF, whose total strength is estimated to be at least 200,000 men,[12] control almost the entire sparsely populated northern part of the country, including the Nile river valley from the Egyptian border to the embattled cities of Khartoum and Omdurman, as well as the entire coast of the Red Sea with the important harbour city of Port Sudan, which serves as the provisional seat of al-Burhan's military government. The border areas with Eritrea in the east and Ethiopia in the south-east are also largely controlled by the SAF. The populous south-west and large parts of the border with South Sudan, as well as the south of the Darfur region and large parts of the border region with Chad, are controlled by the RSF, which is often said to have 100,000 troops.[13]

The RSF emerged in 2013 from a militia encompassing members of nomadic Arab tribes, known as the Janjaweed, which had already gained notoriety as an auxiliary force of the regular Sudanese security forces during the Darfur conflict from 2003.[14] Although the RSF are primarily equipped and trained for infantry combat in urban centres and operations in desert and semi-desert terrain and do not have an air force of their own, since April 2023 they have proven to be on par with the SAF and have inflicted some heavy defeats on them. The strength of the RSF can mainly be attributed to its homogeneity and the large contiguous retreat areas in the west and south-west of the country, its extensive combat experience, high degree of mobility and

relatively good armament. A large number of RSF members were already experienced in combat due to their deployment in the Yemeni civil war from 2019[15] and their participation in the civil war in Libya when the war in Sudan broke out in April 2023. The RSF's good relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which orchestrated the deployment of tens of thousands of Sudanese fighters in Yemen,[16] and its contacts with Libyan General Haftar, stem from its operations in these two countries. In 2019, the UAE had already provided the RSF with more than a thousand off-road vehicles that were converted into weapon carriers and proved to be essential for the organisation's mobile warfare.[17]

However, at the outset of the war, the SAF controlled the much larger share of heavy equipment, the air force and the very strong domestic arms and ammunition production, which had developed into the third largest arms industry in Africa in recent decades with manufacturing capacities for infantry weapons, artillery systems and armoured combat vehicles.[18] The country's defence factories concentrated in the Khartoum area were therefore heavily contested, especially in the summer of 2023. Both warring parties are now de facto dependent on the supply of arms, ammunition and equipment from abroad. Modern types of weapons that provide an operational advantage are particularly sought after, especially drones and anti-aircraft systems. The SAF appear to receive most military support from Egypt, but other states also provide weapons and material of high operational importance. Iran, for example, is said to provide modern drone technology.[19] The UAE is the most important military supporter of the RSF, even though this is regularly denied by the government. Numerous reports indicate that modern weapon systems of various origins, including drones, multiple rocket



Important supporter: Egypt's President al-Sisi (right) is firmly on the side of the Sudanese Armed Forces under General al-Burhan in the Sudanese internal conflict. Photo: © Egyptian Presidency, AA, picture alliance.

launchers, man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank missiles, are being supplied by the UAE to Sudanese paramilitaries.[20] This is done to a lesser extent via routes from Uganda and South Sudan, but mainly via supply routes through Libya and Chad, with aid flights and humanitarian facilities probably being used as cover in some cases.[21] After the fall of the Bashir regime and into the early stages of the war, Russia had good contacts with both General al-Burhan and General Hemedti. Support for the RSF by irregular fighters from the Wagner Group appears to have declined significantly in the aftermath of the attempted coup by Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023. In the meantime, Russia, along with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran, stands firmly behind the SAF and General al-Burhan. Since September 2023, selective operations by Ukrainian special forces against Wagner Group units, renamed Africa Corps, have been reported.[22]

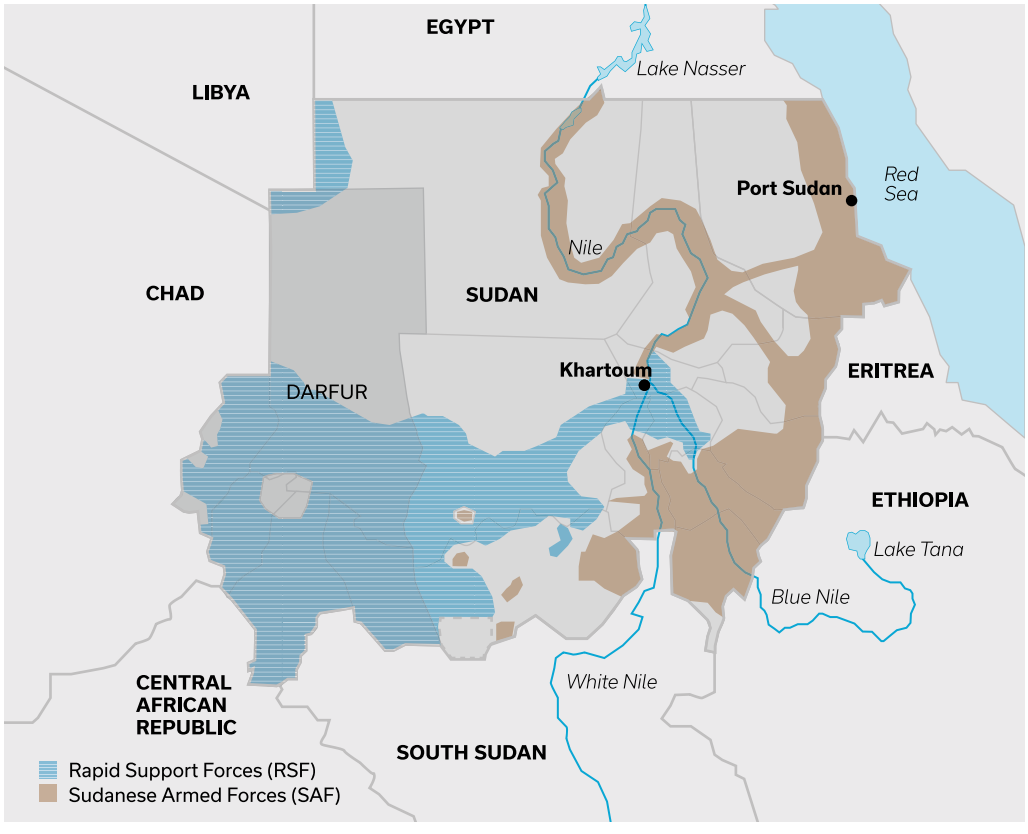
Sudanese refugees are confronted with hostility from parts of the Egyptian population.

Interests and Policies of Key External Players

Egypt

For Egypt, the conflict in Sudan poses a serious threat to its stability and security. In view of the situation in Libya and the war in Gaza, Egyptian President al-Sisi is keen to avoid further

Fig. 1: Territorial Control of the Conflict Parties



Source: own illustration based on Sudan War Monitor, in: Okello, Moses Chrispus 2024: Is peace possible between Sudan's warring parties?, ISS Today, Institute for Security Studies, 2 Sep 2024, in: https://ogy.de/awqf [30 Oct 2024], map: Natural Earth ©.

escalation on the country's southern border at all costs, especially as the conflict with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) continues to intensify. The influx of Sudanese refugees is putting a strain on Egypt's already limited resources and exacerbating existing problems on the housing market, in healthcare and in access to educational institutions. As a result, the Egyptian government has adopted restrictive measures and closed Sudanese refugee schools on the grounds that they are not part of the public school system. Although humanitarian aid is being provided, Sudanese refugees are confronted with hostility from parts of the Egyptian population. This is fuelled by misinformation and economic fears. Media reports and public statements repeatedly portray Sudanese refugees as an additional burden on the struggling economy and the weak social system, leading to tensions with the host community. What is more, misinformation often circulates about disproportionately high benefits for and unfair job allocation to refugees. International aid organisations in Egypt, as in Sudan, face considerable difficulties due to bureaucratic hurdles, particularly lengthy approval procedures and security concerns, and in some cases can only operate to a limited extent.

Saudi Arabia

The government in Riyadh is primarily interested in stability in Sudan, and especially after recent experiences following the Tigray war, it fears a sharp increase in refugee movements via the East African migration route along the strait between Djibouti and Yemen or directly via the nearby Red Sea coasts.[23] It is therefore hardly surprising that Saudi Arabia is supporting the government camp under al-Burhan, whose armed forces control the entire Sudanese part of the Red Sea coast opposite the Arabian Peninsula. The fact that the Kingdom is no longer on the side of the RSF, even though they served as an important military ally in the Yemeni civil war, also reflects the drifting apart of the former close partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is not only in Sudan where these countries have increasingly come into conflict with each other in recent years. Paradoxically, this positioning puts Riyadh behind the same party that is also supported by its arch-enemy Iran. This is because the Gulf monarchy has no interest in Russia or even Iran gaining a military foothold on the Sudanese coast.

Numerous mines have been controlled by General Hemedti for years.

Russia and Iran

Russia's policy towards Sudan has for years been aimed at finalising an agreement to establish a naval base on the Red Sea, similar to the one in Tartus, Syria, on the eastern Mediterranean coast. After a series of exploratory talks with other neighbouring countries failed, Russian and Sudanese sources reported a preliminary agreement in February 2023.[24] The military, including both of today's opponents, had agreed at the time, but referred to the final approval by the civilian government to be elected later. Russia's clear positioning on the side of al-Burhan can above all be explained by the clear prioritisation of the long-awaited naval base near the harbour city of Port Sudan.[25] In recent months, there have been reports that the Iranian government is also interested in a naval base or at least permission to permanently station a larger naval unit in Sudanese waters.[26] Apart from Iran's fundamental strategic interests in gaining a foothold on the coast facing its Saudi arch-enemy, the security policy developments in the Red Sea following Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 are likely to have dramatically increased Tehran's interest in a maritime presence there.

United Arab Emirates

Due to its extensive arms supplies, the UAE is by far the most important ally of the RSF. The involvement in the war in Sudan is a

continuation of Abu Dhabi's policy of the past decade and aims at expanding its own influence on the Arabian Peninsula and in East Africa through economic investment and support for non-state armed groups. In recent years, the UAE has invested more than six billion US dollars in Sudan, particularly in the harbour infrastructure of Port Sudan.[27] Apparently, Abu Dhabi is counting on the RSF gaining the upper hand militarily and taking possession of the Sudanese coastline in the near future. Another strong interest of the UAE lies in Sudan's role as the third largest gold producer in Africa.[28] For years, numerous mines have been controlled by the RSF under General Hemedti, who, as the most important gold trader in his country,[29] is one of the central suppliers for markets in the Persian Gulf. The fact that the UAE is making major profits from the gold trade with a party to the conflict should be addressed more strongly by the EU.

Ethiopia

The security of the economically significant Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, located just 45 kilometres from the Sudanese border, is of central interest to the Ethiopian government. The construction of the dam on the Nile was a serious point of contention between Ethiopia and Egypt for two decades. Egypt fears becoming heavily dependent on Ethiopia for the country's drinking water supply. So far, Sudan has adopted a balancing and neutral position. Addis Ababa is now keeping a close eye on whether and to what extent the balance of power is shifting in the constellation of these three states. Against this background, Ethiopia is seen as a supporter of Hemedti, the opponent of the Egyptian protégé. The government in Addis Ababa has been regularly accused of providing at least indirect military support to the RSF. From the Ethiopian perspective, another security concern is to avoid a resurgence of the border conflict over the al-Fashaga region. This fertile agricultural land was the subject of a compromise solution ("soft border") in 2008, whereby the Sudanese claim was recognised, but Ethiopian citizens were allowed to continue farming there. In the wake of the Tigray conflict, however, armed militias not under the control of the central government in Addis Ababa have articulated a full claim to ownership.

Chad

The United Nations arms embargo on the Darfur region in western Sudan, which has been in place since 2005, has been unable to prevent the main route for arms supplies from Chad from leading into this very region. Numerous Chadian citizens, almost exclusively ethnic Arabs, also fought in the ranks of the RSF from the outset.[30] This, in turn, harbours the risk of a spillover of the conflict onto Chadian territory. The de facto president of Chad, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, and a large part of the country's elite belong to the Zaghawa ethnic group, which is largely based in Darfur, Sudan, and is fighting against the Arab groups. With some 900,000 Sudanese refugees, an estimated 88 per cent of whom are women and children, having arrived in the eastern regions of Chad over the past 18 months,[31] the country, which is one of the poorest in the world, also has a considerable humanitarian burden to bear.

The main obstacle to a peace process is an unwillingness to compromise on the part of the two main parties to the conflict.

South Sudan and Uganda

The southern neighbours Uganda and South Sudan are also heavily affected by the refugee movements. There are currently an estimated 500,000 Sudanese refugees in South Sudan, which until 2011 was part of their own country of origin.[32] Prior to the outbreak of the war, there were around 55,000 Sudanese refugees in Uganda.[33] A further 170,000 people have arrived since, but have not been granted official refugee status due to reservations on the part of the Ugandan authorities. A similar danger of

being drawn into the conflict, as seen in Chad, also exists for South Sudan. South Sudanese citizens have joined both the RSF and the SAF. Furthermore, the war in Sudan is jeopardising the export of South Sudanese oil, 100 per cent of which is exported via Port Sudan accounting for some 90 per cent of South Sudanese state revenue. Apart from the supply routes for the RSF via Libya and Chad, there are repeated reports of supplies and support networks in South Sudan and Uganda.[34]

A number of states, including the People's Republic of China, Turkey, Israel, Kenya and Qatar, also have considerable (security) policy and economic interests in Sudan and therefore maintain relations with both sides without taking a clear stance.

Peace Talks – Many Initiatives, Little Hope

Since the outbreak of the war, there have been various mediation efforts to achieve a temporary or permanent ceasefire or to initiate a structured peace process. The talks in Jeddah mediated by Saudi Arabia and the US, which began in May 2023 and ultimately led to talks in Geneva in August 2024, attracted a great deal of attention. In addition to the hosts – the US, Saudi Arabia and Switzerland – Egypt, the UAE, the AU and the UN took part as observers. This round of mediation efforts also ended without any substantial results. The SAF had withdrawn their participation, while the RSF participated with a small delegation after initial hesitation. It is worth noting that the observers Egypt, UAE and AU all have experience from their own exploratory initiatives, which at times ran in parallel. The AU alone has tried to initiate substantive talks in three different formats but failed, just like the East African regional organisation Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) with its IGAD Quartet on Sudan.[35]

While criticism is often levelled against the plethora of negotiation formats and the low level of coordination, the main obstacle to a real peace process, or even just temporary ceasefires, is the lack of willingness to negotiate or compromise on the part of the two main parties to the conflict. The high level of influence exerted by external players in the conflict has significantly complicated the framework conditions for a political solution. Relying on their regional alliances and external support, the SAF and RSF leaderships seem to believe that they can significantly improve their respective positions on the battlefield. In this context, it is questionable if and to what extent they still act independently in their decision-making or whether they have already become dependent on their external allies when it comes to the question of "negotiations versus continuation of the fighting".

Both parties to the conflict have deliberately used hunger as a weapon against parts of the civilian population.

Two prerequisites are regularly cited for the success of future peace initiatives: on the one hand, the supply of weapons to the warring parties from the outside ought to be stopped and, on the other, the external allies of the two opponents would have to force them to the negotiating table. In addition to Egypt and the Gulf states, Turkey and the US, in particular, are seen as potential mediators and relevant players with sufficient influence.

Human Rights Violations on an Almost Unimaginable Scale

Given that a large part of the fiercely contested zones are located in urban areas, the war in Sudan has been characterised by a very high number of civilian casualties right from the start. Half of the population has fled the capital Khartoum. According to the UN, more than 13 million people are currently displaced as a result of the fighting over the past 18 months. Of these, 10.7 million are considered internally displaced persons (IDPs); 2.3 million Sudanese citizens have sought refuge outside their country. Since

Great suffering: According to the UN, roughly 13 million Sudanese have been displaced – most of them within their country, more than 2 million abroad, like here in Chad. Photo: © David Allignon, MAXPPP, dpa, picture alliance.

the start of the conflict, more than 20,000 Sudanese[36] have lost their lives, although some sources estimate significantly higher numbers.[37] Around 25 million people, about half of Sudan's population, need humanitarian aid. The scale of this humanitarian disaster now exceeds that of the Syrian refugee crisis eight years ago. Recently, representatives of European aid organisations spoke of a hunger crisis of historic proportions[38] and the UN has identified the worst famine in more than 40 years[39] – prices for staple foods in Sudan have recently risen by up to 200 per cent compared to the previous year.[40] Both parties to the conflict have already deliberately caused food shortages in order to use hunger as a weapon against parts of the civilian population.[41]

If adequate care for internally displaced persons is not ensured, there is a risk of a wave of refugees on the scale of 2015.

Ethnically motivated atrocities and targeted killings of members of non-Arab population groups also regularly occur in Sudan. Continuous ethnic cleansing is reported above all from the Darfur region. In November 2023 alone, more than 1,000 civilians were killed there, mainly from the Masalit ethnic group.[42] In addition, the warring parties are deliberately destroying supply infrastructure, looting and pillaging, which leads to large-scale flight and displacement and in some cases to the outbreak of epidemics, such as cholera. The vast majority of the Sudanese population no longer have access to adequate healthcare. According to reports, 70 per cent of hospitals are no longer functional.[43] Other crimes against humanity include the use of torture and the systematic use of rape,[44] sometimes of minors,[45] as a weapon. The speed and scale of the humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan as well as the high risk of it spreading to the entire region are now

being mentioned in the same breath as the wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Syria.

Outlook and Implications for German and European Policy

Even if the resources of German and European politicians were not absorbed by the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and the political will for engagement in the Horn of Africa or for a stabilisation mission in Sudan were present, many questions would still remain. Following the disastrous results of stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan and the Sahel, all concepts for interventions aimed at building peace, combating the causes of displacement and maintaining or establishing state structures continue to be under scrutiny. Although the political will is there and commitments have been made, Germany does not currently participate in EUNAVFOR Aspides as planned due to its very limited military resources, even though the mission aims to protect vital German interests.[46] The EU mission, deployed since February 2024, is tasked with protecting international shipping in the Red Sea from attacks by the Yemeni Houthis. In any case, the question of German involvement in Sudan does not arise in Berlin beyond the assumption of costs for humanitarian aid and participation in diplomatic initiatives.

In the diplomatic sphere, Germany plays an important role bilaterally or within the framework of the EU, despite its very limited direct influence on the two main parties to the conflict, and should endeavour to expand this role. In light of the current migratory pressure on Europe's borders, it is in German policy makers' objective interest to contain the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and counteract further destabilisation of the entire region. If it is not possible to ensure adequate care for the internally displaced persons within Sudan, there is a risk of a wave of refugees heading towards Europe on the scale of 2015. It was only recently reported that 60 per cent of the people in the refugee camps in Calais, France, are already Sudanese citizens.[47] In view of the population development and migration potential in the countries of the Horn of Africa, Europe cannot afford to allow another neighbouring region to descend into chaos. When compared to the refugee and migration scenarios, the European states' lagging behind in the systemic conflict with Russia and China in that region and the scenario of Islamist terrorist organisations infiltrating the Sudanese vacuum, almost pose the lesser security policy challenges.

– translated from German –

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Many Players and No Solution

On the Ongoing Conflict in Eastern Congo

Jakob Kerstan

War-like conditions have prevailed in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo[1] for more than 30 years. The ensuing humanitarian disaster has cost several million lives to date and led to a new record number of internally displaced persons in 2024.[2] But what is the background to the conflict? Which players shape it? And why is there still no end in sight?

Largely unnoticed by the German public, the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been characterised by a bloody conflict for decades. International observers now estimate that more than six million people have died in the past 30 years.[3] This would make the conflict the deadliest since the Second World War. However, the figures are disputed as most of the victims are civilians and did not die as a result of direct war acts, but rather due to malnutrition, for example.[4] Additionally, the Congo now has more than seven million internally displaced persons. Since 2022 alone, the number of people seeking protection has increased by a further 2.2 million. The refugee camps on the outskirts of the eastern Congolese provincial capital of Goma have long been overcrowded, chronically underfunded and, in some cases, a war zone themselves, which has led to catastrophic hygiene conditions and the spread of diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Even if political stability prevails in the Congolese capital Kinshasa following the confident re-election of President Félix Tshisekedi at the end of 2023, the eastern provinces remain a hotbed of conflict and crisis in a country whose population is at least 100 million. For decades, the Congolese security forces have been unable to control their own territory in the east of the country and offer protection to the population. More than 100 rebel groups, some with years of support from neighbouring countries, are exploiting this vacuum. In particular, the March 23 Movement (M23), which is supported by Rwanda with up to 4,000 soldiers and now controls larger parts of eastern Congo than any other rebel group, has been responsible for the conflict's escalation in recent years.

History and Drivers of Conflict

The Congo is part of the ethnically mixed Great Lakes Region in Central Africa, which also includes Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and parts of Kenya and Tanzania. The first coordinated migration movements from today's Rwanda to the east of today's Congo were organised during the Belgian colonial period due to Rwandan overpopulation and simultaneous labour shortage in the Congo.

The current main conflict in eastern Congo is based on the genocide committed by members of the Hutu ethnic group against the Tutsi ethnic group in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994. Mobutu Sese Seko, the longstanding dictator ruling Kinshasa at the time, not only tried to fill his country's empty coffers with international donations by taking in at least one million Rwandan refugees, but also wanted to increase his international standing after he had lost his usefulness and relevance to the West with the fall of the Iron Curtain.

However, among those refugees were not only victims of the genocide but also many of its perpetrators: the notorious Interahamwe militias and large sections of the former Rwandan government, including the Hutu-dominated armed forces. These Hutu extremists soon took control of the Congolese refugee camps and created paramilitary structures that posed a threat to the new Rwandan government which, under the leadership of the militia leader and subsequent Rwandan President Paul Kagame, pursued the perpetrators of the genocide into the depths of the neighbouring country, which is 90 times

larger than Rwanda. In 1997, a military coalition supported by Rwanda and Uganda finally overthrew the long-term president Mobutu, partly because they accused him of harbouring rebels. Turbulent years of war followed, with numerous and serious human rights violations being committed on Congolese territory.[5]

The wars fuelled by Rwanda and Uganda under the guise of fighting Congolese rebel groups and lasting until 2003, involved numerous African states as parties to the conflict. The Second Congo War is therefore also known as the "African World War".[6] The densely populated Rwanda was not only concerned with securing its own borders, but also with expanding its political and economic influence in the Great Lakes region.[7]

Congo's immense raw materials reserves are of outstanding importance not only for Rwanda, but also for the global economy and the global energy and mobility transition. Many raw materials that are primarily needed in the electronics industry can be found in the eastern part of, in terms of area, Africa's second-largest country. The conflict is fuelled by the smuggling of minerals such as tin, tungsten, coltan (tantalum), gold and diamonds, which are often mined under inhumane conditions. Armed groups control mining areas and smuggling routes. Gold and coltan, in particular, are transported across the border to Rwanda (and Uganda) and from there sold on as "conflict-free" raw materials.[8] The Congolese government estimates that it loses one billion US dollars a year in revenue from raw materials illegally taken out of the country. Recently, the country even sued the electronics company Apple for using "stolen" minerals from the Congo in its iPhones. In addition to profiteers on the Rwandan side, many Congolese from the security sector are also part of these complex interdependencies – a fact that is often ignored in the political argumentation on the Congolese side, as people here benefit from the status quo, too. This makes a solution to the conflict even more difficult.

Apart from security interests, Rwanda's economic dependence on exports of raw materials that actually come from the Congo therefore plays a decisive role, as these are only available to a very limited extent in Rwanda itself. Thus, gold now accounts for one third of all Rwandan exports.[9] Furthermore, coltan exports have risen sharply in recent years, directly correlating with the territorial expansion of the M23 supported by Rwanda. The mine in Rubaya, captured by M23 rebels and the world's largest coltan mine according to experts, plays an important role in this.[10] Alongside security interests, these economic ties are Rwanda's unacknowledged though main reason for being active in eastern Congo.

There are repeated reports of M23 crimes against the civilian population.

Key Players and Their Interests

The M23: Emergence, Resurgence and the Role of Rwanda

The rebel group M23 is a key player in the conflict in eastern Congo. It was founded in 2012 by officers of Tutsi origin from the Congolese army. They accused the Congolese state of violating an earlier army integration agreement of 23 March 2009, and rebelled. The name is derived from that date. Even then, international observers assumed that Rwanda had a direct influence on this group. From 2013, the M23 found temporary refuge in the Congo-Uganda-Rwanda border triangle, where it ceased its activities for several years. Even between the official end of the Second Congo War in 2003 and the founding of the M23 rebel movement nine years later, Rwanda had always supported various armed groups in eastern Congo in order to secure its sphere of influence. Accordingly, the fear of many Congolese citizens of foreign influence has grown historically and is deeply rooted in their mentality. For example, every year on 2 August, the government in Kinshasa celebrates the day of remembrance for the "Genocost" – a genocide due to economic interests.

The M23 describes itself as a multi-ethnic political movement that campaigns for the rights of Congolese Tutsis and good governance. Although several UN reports prove that the M23's command structures are controlled by Rwanda, Kigali continues to deny any direct involvement and describes the M23 as a purely Congolese phenomenon with "legitimate" concerns.

After a ceasefire that lasted several years, the M23 fighters took up arms again at the end of 2021 and have now displaced millions of people in eastern Congo and taken control of large parts of North Kivu, including the famous Virunga National Park. This eastern province of the Congo alone, where martial law has been in force since 2021 and the civilian government has been replaced by the military, is around twice the size of Rwanda. In addition to hundreds of thousands of refugees, there are repeated reports of M23 crimes against the civilian population, including the particularly brutal massacre in Kishishe in November 2023, in which 171 civilians were executed.

The resurgence of the M23 from insignificance is probably linked to another rebel group, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). This terrorist group is opposed to Uganda's long-term president Yoweri Museveni, joined the so-called Islamic State in 2019 and is, among other things, responsible for attacks on schools and the deadly terrorist attacks in the Ugandan capital Kampala in November 2021.

One consequence of the attacks was military cooperation between Uganda and the Congo to combat terrorism. In addition to the presence of Ugandan soldiers on Congolese territory, the alliance also provided for the expansion of infrastructure in eastern Congo. Uganda too has long since been considered a buyer of gold smuggled from eastern Congo. A new trade route between the two largest cities in the eastern Congolese

Fig. 1: Area of Operation of the Rebel Movement M23 in Eastern Congo (as of August 2024)

Source: own illustration based on Human Rights Watch 2024 according to information provided by Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in: DR Congo: Rwandan Forces, M23 Rebels Shell Civilians, Human Rights Watch, 26 Sep 2024, in: https://ogy.de/ki16 [22 Nov 2024], map: Natural Earth ©.

province of North Kivu, Beni and Goma, seemed possible. This meant Rwanda risked losing existing networks in its area of influence in the province.[11] To avoid this, at the end of 2021 Rwanda began providing renewed military support to the M23, which acts against the Congolese army and other rebel groups.

In the areas currently under its control, the M23 maintains a parallel administration. Among other things, it raises money by smuggling gold and coltan and by levying customs duties, for example in Bunagana, a town near the border with Uganda. The M23 has now also joined a new political grouping, the Congo River Alliance (AFC), which was founded in December 2023. The US-sanctioned group wants to overthrow the current Congolese government and is led by Corneille Nangaa, the former head of the Congolese Electoral Commission (CENI) of the controversial 2018 elections.

Since the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has seen itself as the protecting power of the Tutsi living in the Congo. According to Rwanda's argument, the Congolese government is responsible for a situation in which another, state-sponsored, genocide is looming in eastern Congo. Kigali refers to the (alleged) discrimination against Tutsi in the Congo since the 1994 genocide. Although there are indeed stereotypes, prejudices and occasionally ethnically motivated violence against Tutsis, this is by no means directly controlled from Kinshasa. Paradoxically, Rwandan support for the Tutsi rebel group M23 leads to a spiral of discredit and thus to the Congolese Tutsis being repeatedly equated with the rebel group, which is widely hated in the country, therefore fuelling prejudice against the ethnic group. At the same time, the Congolese government accuses Rwanda of committing genocide against the Congolese Hutu through the activities of the M23. Rwanda and the Congo instrumentalise that international legal concept and accuse each other of fuelling a so-called genocide.

A UN report published in June 2024 confirms the presence of up to 4,000 Rwandan soldiers in eastern Congo, which would account for more than ten per cent of the Rwandan military.[12] According to international observers, the M23 itself only has around 2,000 to 3,000 fighters, so without Rwandan support, the group would scarcely have the quantitative relevance nor the qualitative structure and organisational strength it actually has. The Rwandan army, the most capable military in the region with surface-to-air missiles and guided mortar systems, probably enabled the M23 to shoot down a United Nations helicopter in March 2022. By providing military support to the M23, Rwanda is also violating a United Nations arms embargo on non-state troops in eastern Congo. The Congo is constantly trying to expand its military capacities in order to counter this technical superiority, but repeatedly encounters financial and structural hurdles.

From Rwanda's perspective, the Congolese government is incapable of providing security in the east of its own country.

The Unpredictable Congolese Armed Forces

The Armed Forces of the Congo (FARDC) have been riddled with mismanagement, disorganisation, corruption and demotivation for decades, while there is also a lack of clear command and communication structures. Several attempts at reform have been ineffective, which is why Kinshasa still does not have complete control over its own army in the east of the country. The FARDC, consisting of almost 100,000 men, is therefore one of the main drivers of the conflict.

From Rwanda's point of view, one of the Congo's main problems is the cooperation of parts of its military with rebel groups. Here, there is no dissent from Western governments, including Germany and the EU, which condemn the cooperation between the FARDC and various militias in every statement on Rwanda's responsibility. Poorly paid and inadequately trained

Congolese soldiers sell uniforms, weapons and information to rebel groups. The financial emergency situation plays just as much a role as dependency relationships that have grown over many years on a personal level.

Almost all armed militias in eastern Congo recruit child soldiers.

The most controversial is the cooperation between parts of the FARDC and the rebels of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR, see section below). Although the FDLR has fought on the side of the Congo several times in the past, whenever it was opportune in the respective political situation, the government in Kinshasa still published a declaration at the end of 2023 stating that all soldiers cooperating with the FDLR would be arrested. Nevertheless, contact has never been broken off: existing dependencies appear too entrenched. Since the FDLR and the Rwandan government are enemies, it is precisely this interdependence that provides Rwanda with the argumentation to become itself militarily active in eastern Congo. From Rwanda's perspective (and this is factually correct), the Congolese government is not militarily capable of providing full security in the east of its country. This is not only due to the great distances within the Congo and a lack of infrastructure, but also to the lack of motivation within the military, which weakens its monopoly on power.

Only better pay, more transparent financial flows and a change of mentality within the military could bring about an improvement here. Despite rising defence budgets, the pay of some Congolese soldiers is only just under 100 US dollars per month – that is if they are paid at all. They are remunerated via influential generals who often own large assets and only pass on the soldiers' wages sporadically. In addition to poor pay, inadequate equipment and logistical difficulties, the soldiers' widespread mistrust of their own hierarchy – the Congo has recently reintroduced the death penalty for treason – is an additional destabilising factor.

The FDLR: A Danger for Rwanda?

The FDLR is a military movement organised after the Rwandan genocide by parts of the Hutu who fled the country and is still active today as a rebel force in eastern Congo. The main goal of the FDLR and the splinter groups that have emerged from it is to overthrow the Rwandan government. It is financed by the smuggling of

A coveted raw material: What is believed to be the world's largest coltan mine is located near Rubaya in eastern Congo. Photo: © Baz Ratner, Reuters, picture alliance.

raw materials, the charcoal trade and the levying of illegal customs duties and taxes. The FDLR is also accused of guerrilla attacks and assaults on civilians, such as the assassination of Italian ambassador Luca Attanasio in 2021. Even if their current clout is considered low and Rwandan territory is currently not under attack, the fighters are repeatedly seen by Kigali as a reason (or, depending on the point of view, a pretext) for pursuing military interests in the Congo. Given that, according to Kigali's argument, the FDLR poses an existential threat to the Rwandan government and the Tutsi living in the Congo, Rwanda takes on the task of indirectly "ensuring order" in eastern Congo via the M23. However, a rebel group such as the FDLR, which according to unofficial estimates has no more than 2,000 fighters left, does not actually pose a serious threat to a highly armed country like Rwanda.

Countless Other Players

The M23 is the militarily strongest rebel group and the one that controls the most territory in eastern Congo. There are also at least 120 other armed militias active in the region, which are often smaller and regionally focused and often act as self-defence forces.[13] Almost all of them recruit child soldiers. In a region without functioning state structures, they compete for power, resources and economic influence. Some conflicts also have an ethnic origin. For example, the Lendu militias, as arable farmers, primarily fight against the cattle-breeding Hema. Other players such as the ADF or RED-Tabara are in opposition to the governments of Uganda and Burundi, respectively. The Mai Mai militias are spread across a wide geographical area and are less easy to define. Even if the M23 were to be defeated, the problem of the countless other rebel groups would remain unresolved. This is why an overall pacification of eastern Congo currently seems extremely unrealistic.

Despite mutual threats, a direct war between Rwanda and the Congo is unrealistic.

In addition to the Congolese army, Burundian and Ugandan troops are also active in eastern Congo as more institutionalised parties to the

Before the ice age: Rwandan president Paul Kagame (right) and his Congolese counterpart Félix Tshisekedi met in Kigali in 2021. Today they threaten each other with war. Photo: © Habimana Thierry, AA, picture alliance.

conflict within the framework of bilateral military agreements. Furthermore, the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and a Southern African Development Community (SADC) intervention force of up to 4,800 troops from South Africa, Malawi and Tanzania are present in the Congo, after the unsuccessful Kenyan-led East African Economic Community (EAC) mission withdrew last year.[14]

In addition, the private Romanian security company Asociatia RALF and a few independently operating military trainers of French nationality have been active on the side of the Congolese government since the beginning of 2023.[15] The presence of the Eastern European troops, numbering up to 1,000 men, in the city of Goma quickly led the civilian population to mistakenly designate them as Russians. The Congolese government continues to refer to the mercenaries as military advisors.

Moreover, the government in Kinshasa has been militarising youth gangs and thugs, thereby showing its desperation. The coalition of the Congolese armed forces with various armed groups, called Wazalendo ("patriots" in Swahili), is an incalculable risk over the long term and probably the starting point for new internal conflicts in the Congo. This is in stark contrast to the desirable implementation of demobilisation campaigns. The Wazalendo, who are accused of serious human rights violations and who are partly recruited from (former) militiamen, are not bound by any orders from the army.

What to Do?

From 2019, Congolese President Tshisekedi took numerous diplomatic steps towards his neighbouring countries at the beginning of his first term of office, when he held the chairmanship of the African Union (AU). He also led the Congo to membership of the EAC. In addition, Tshisekedi met his Rwandan counterpart Kagame in Kigali in 2019 and 2021. Since then, however, the bilateral relationship has gone downhill. Strong diplomatic actions, such as the expulsion of the Rwandan ambassador and the ban on overflights by the state airline Rwandair, had no effect.

Rwanda is very self-assured in the conflict. Kagame was confirmed in office with an official result of 99 per cent in the mid-July 2024 elections that did, however, not meet democratic standards. He has already expressed his willingness to engage in a direct armed confrontation with the Congo. In a way, he was responding to Tshisekedi, who, during the election campaign at the end of 2023, predicted that he would take Kigali with the approval of the Congolese parliament if he won the election. However, a direct war is unrealistic, as Rwanda is satisfied with the status quo. In addition, the Congolese side is aware of its military inferiority.

It should be in Germany's strategic interest to expand relations with the essentially pro-Western government of the Congo.

Several UN peacekeeping missions with different names and mandates have largely failed to fully protect the civilian population in eastern Congo, including MONUSCO, although its current annual budget is still just under one billion US dollars and it was the largest and most expensive UN mission in the world. Despite some small successes, such as the protection of the civilian population in the immediate vicinity of their military bases, the various UN missions have never been able to fulfil the high expectations for a variety of reasons. In December 2023, the UN Security Council decided to accelerate the withdrawal of MONUSCO, which has gradually begun. However, the Congolese security forces are already overwhelmed by the vacuum that has developed. Kinshasa is now saying that conditions, such as the withdrawal of Rwandan troops, must first be met before the UN mission can fully withdraw. Since this is unrealistic in

the short term, a hasty withdrawal of the UN mission in the Congo is not to be expected.

Although the current Congolese government is considered pro-Western, it likes to accuse Europe and the US of cynicism and hypocrisy in the conflict in eastern Congo. In particular, sanctions are being called for against Rwanda. Ukraine is also cited as an example, which from the Congolese perspective faces a "similar fate" of foreign aggression. Europe is perceived as biased, particularly due to the EU's proximity to Rwanda, and many Congolese get the impression that Europeans only respect international law when it serves their own interests.

After three decades of conflict, however, the first signs are now emerging that Western countries are becoming increasingly critical of Rwanda's role in eastern Congo. In addition to countless press releases calling on Rwanda to stop supporting the M23, the EU, mainly at the urging of the former colonial power Belgium, initially blocked payments of 20 million euros to the Rwandan anti-terrorist brigade in Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique.

Rwanda is skilled at selling itself on the diplomatic stage.

Russia has recently spread rumours about bilateral military agreements with the Congo. Although this is denied by the Congolese side, Moscow has long had its sights on Kinshasa as a potential target for political influence; for example, through the dissemination of fake news about Western players on social media. These attempts at rapprochement by Russia and other players (for example, Kinshasa recently acquired Chinese drones and Turkish police equipment) will intensify due to the Congo's geostrategic importance. Western countries, on the other hand, have thus far offered comparatively few opportunities for collaboration beyond development cooperation. It should be in Germany's strategic interest to expand relations with difficult, but essentially pro-Western governments such as that of the Congo.

In the hyper-militarised environment of eastern Congo, even additional military alliances such as the SADC troops will not bring lasting peace to the conflict that has spanned decades. It is therefore not a long-term solution for Kinshasa to simply play the role of victim; rather, the domestic political debate should focus more on the Congo's own responsibility. Any cooperation between state players and rebel groups such as the FDLR should be ended as a matter of urgency. But that alone would not bring about a complete solution. Although Rwanda describes the FDLR as an existential threat, this did not prompt Rwanda to provide direct military support to the M23 between 2013 and 2021. The rearmament of the M23 cannot therefore be explained by this problem alone. Instead, a regional and inclusive approach to solving the raw materials problem should be found, with transparency measures representing a step in the right direction.

The Luanda process initiated by the AU and led by Angola, which is also closely supported by the US, continues to push for direct peace negotiations between Tshisekedi and Kagame. This is still ruled out by Kinshasa. It is worth noting that Rwanda has repeatedly committed to ceasefire agreements at the negotiating table. Even if there are strong doubts about the sincerity of such statements, Rwanda thus indirectly acknowledges its influence on the M23.

Rwanda is skilled at selling itself on the diplomatic stage and can score points not only with political stability, but also with a good investment climate at international level. The country also spends a lot on its tourism branding on the football shirts of Bayern Munich or Arsenal London, thereby investing in visible and positively connoted ties to the West. Rwanda is also one of the largest troop contributors to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide. However, a large part of the state budget still depends on international donors. Therefore, future payments from international donors could be more closely linked to

Rwanda's role in eastern Congo. After the M23 briefly captured the megacity of Goma in 2012, Rwanda ended its support for the rebel force due to international pressure and a cut in development funding, including by Germany. This resulted in the M23 withdrawing from Goma and the rebel group has not since attempted to capture the city again. Germany should exploit its good reputation in both countries and mediate more actively in the conflict. The new Congolese Foreign Minister, Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner, who was socialised and educated in Germany, could be particularly important in this respect. There are excellent contacts on the Rwandan side as well, not least owing to the more than 40-year partnership with the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate. The events in eastern Congo should also be consistently addressed in current discussions about possible migration agreements with Rwanda.

Even if the M23 were to be defeated, there are still an immense number of non-state military groups in the region. A long-term alleviation of the humanitarian catastrophe in eastern Congo requires reform of the Congolese security sector, with a better organised Congolese army and administration, as well as regional negotiations involving the neighbouring countries. The AU or the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) could play a greater role here. The EU, with its special representative for the region, should also support (future) peace processes more closely, both in terms of content and funding. Increased international interest and associated diplomatic peace efforts are crucial to achieving sustainable progress on the long-term path to stabilisation in eastern Congo.

– translated from German –

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Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises

A Country against the Military

On the Political Situation in Myanmar

Moritz Fink / Saw Kyaw Zin Khay

Early February 2025 will mark the fourth anniversary of the military coup against the democratically elected government of Myanmar. Armed resistance has formed in large parts of the country and is spearheaded by the People's Defence Force and several ethnic armed organisations. Resistance and opposition movements have gained momentum in a series of military victories; albeit debates about a "post-military" state are premature.

Myanmar in the Fourth Year Following the Military Coup

On 1 February 2021, the military (Tatmadaw) staged a coup in Myanmar against the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), whose party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), had won a landslide victory in the November 2020 election. On the day of the constituent session of the newly elected parliament, State Councillor ASSK, State President Win Myint and other high-ranking parliamentarians were arrested. This led to a state of emergency being declared, and the internet was shut down. Shortly afterwards, the military formed the State Administration Council (SAC) to restore "peace and order".

The takeover by the army initially led to widespread peaceful protests ("Civil Disobedience Movement") on the streets of Myanmar, which the security forces gradually suppressed with increasing brutality. Mass killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence and other abuses have been committed by the junta, all of which constitute crimes against humanity. The death penalty was also administered to four men after more than 30 years following summary and mock trials. The Head of the UN Human Rights Council, Nicholas Koumjian, stated in August 2024 that the "Myanmar military was committing war crimes and crimes against humanity 'at an alarming rate'".[1]

Photos and reports of villages being burnt down are commonplace. Air strikes and attacks on the civilian population also take place time and again, notably in Kachin State in October 2022 when more than 100 civilians were killed (Hpakant Massacre) during a ceremony. Aerial bombardment has been dramatically increased throughout the last year, Mr Koumjian added.[2] The United Nations' Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) reported that more than three million people are estimated to have been forced to flee their homes over the past six months alone.[3] UN Human Rights Commissioner Volker Türk described the situation in Myanmar as a "never-ending nightmare".[4] Furthermore, the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners puts the number of fatalities caused by the military (as of 23 October 2024) at 5,871, as well as another 27,569 people arrested, while other estimates are much higher.[5]

To add insult to injury, people are also suffering from the military conscription law (men: 18 to 35 years; women 18 to 27) enforced in early February 2024 by the SAC. This law also led to the migration of skilled workers and talented youth across Myanmar to neighbouring countries. The economy will continue to deteriorate in the foreseeable future, a recent World Bank report concluded.[6] Much of the progress made during a phase of opening the country, especially under the civilian leadership of the NLD from 2015, has largely been reduced to nothing with half of the population living under the poverty line.[7]

Decades under Military Rule

It is certainly not the first time that the people of Myanmar and in particular the various ethnic

minorities in the border regions have suffered immensely at the hands of the Tatmadaw. Following a military coup in 1962, General Ne Win seized power in Myanmar and completely sealed off the country for more than half a century. All subsequent military dictators ruled the country with an iron grip. Peaceful protests for more democratisation and transparency, for instance, such as those in 1988 and 2007, were bloodily suppressed. Furthermore, massive election defeats for the political forces backing the military regime, such as in the NLD's victory in 1990, were not recognised, and opposition figures such as ASSK were placed under house arrest even at that time.

The resistance encompasses broad sectors of society.

In 2005, the military government moved the capital from Yangon to Nay Pyi Taw and amended the constitution three years later. That gave the military control over three ministries: defence, border and home affairs. They also have a fixed share of 25 per cent of parliamentary seats in the upper and lower houses, which amounts to a blocking minority for constitutional amendments. Myanmar's 2008 constitution severely restricts the political participation of its many ethnic minorities, alienating them from common institutions such as parliament and ministries.

The Bamar people, Myanmar's main ethnic group, make up about 69 per cent of the population and live mainly in the country's heartland. While the various ethnic minorities, such as the Chin, Mon, Shan, Kachin and Karen, can mainly be found in the border areas with Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand. We hereby refer to the "ethnic states" that are dominated by an ethnicity which, speaking of Myanmar as a whole, constitutes a minority.

The appointment of Thein Sein (himself with a long military past) as the nominally civilian president in 2011 heralded the start of the country's gradual opening. This resulted in free and fair elections in 2015 and an election victory for the NLD. Under the NLD-led government of State Councillor ASSK, priority was accorded to national reconciliation in the Panglong Peace Conferences. The aim was to bring ethnic armed organisations and the Tatmadaw to the negotiating table, get them to sign the

Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), and to discuss the prospect of a more federal and equitable Myanmar – goals that are now emerging once again.

Ethnic organisations had resisted the military virtually since the country's independence to defend themselves and their identity against successive dictators in Myanmar who pursued a policy of "Burmanisation"; this refers to a forced assimilation, ranging from the suppression of their teaching of ethnic history, language and culture, to military attacks, human rights violations and atrocities on civilians.[8] The Tatmadaw ignored the pursuit of self-determination and even secession movements of the ethnic states and attempted to push the ethnic states into the "Union" through coercion and military

Self-perception and reality: Myanmar's military still considers itself to be the nation's "guardian of unity" – but its actions have divided the country like never before. Photo: © Aung Shine Oo, AP, picture alliance.

might. The military still considers itself to be the "guardian of unity", mandated to preserve the country from falling apart.

Broad Coalition against the Military

Shortly after the 2021 coup, Myanmar's interim National Unity Government (NUG) was formed by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), with authority derived from the people's mandate in the 2020 election. The NUG comprises lawmakers from the NLD and other MPs who were ousted in the coup and are now forming the government in exile. In the political sphere, it has been working closely with the ethnic organisations, such as the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and Chin National Front (CNF), also known as K3C, as well as other ethnic revolutionary organisations and ethnic political leaders. Their cooperation now increasingly extends to the battlefields, where the People's Defence Force (PDF) acts as the NUG's military arm.

The junta is desperately trying to gain international recognition.

It is crucial to note that the resistance encompasses broad sectors of society, both Bamar and the ethnic minorities. "The widespread anti-junta movement has moved on from calls to reinstate the 2020 election results [...] to become a radical and intersectional Spring Revolution, aiming to fundamentally change state-society relations in Myanmar."[9] Almost all of the resistance groups have a joint understanding that the military poses a threat to the people of Myanmar and is what stands between them and a better future for the country and its people.[10] The Myanmar military is deeply unpopular and overwhelmingly seen as the enemy of the state, except only for cronies, as well as families and businesses linked to the military.

State of the Military in 2024 – the "Enemy of the State"

Armed resistance from the ranks of the ethnic armed organisations and the PDF has recently become more professional. Pressure on the military has been growing especially since the powerful Three Brotherhood Alliance (consisting of three ethnic armed organisations) launched a comprehensive and highly successful offensive (Operation 1027) in northern Shan State in October 2023. The city of Laukkaing, on the border with China and known for gambling, prostitution and online fraud, which had previously provided the military junta with crucial hard currency, was captured.

In April 2024, for the first time in history, drones attacked the military stronghold and capital of Myanmar, Nay Pyi Taw.[11] What is more, in August 2024, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, seized the northern town of Lashio in Shan State. Lashio hosts a regional command centre for the Myanmar military and is located along a vital trade route to China. While writing this paper, 53 towns were captured and controlled by the revolutionary forces in the Chin, Karreni, Nothern Shan, Rakhine, Kachin and Karen States.[12] These successes against the military are unprecedented in the history of Myanmar. Loss of control over the outer areas of the country is also tantamount to the military no longer having access to important trade and communication links with India, China and Thailand, or only to a limited extent. Drug cultivation and the illegal trade in timber, jade stones and weapons are flourishing in these areas, especially in the northeast.

Although the junta continues to exercise control over the populous and economically important heartland of Myanmar, including major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay, it faces entirely new challenges. Reports indicate defections from the military ranks or surrenders.[13] In August 2024, there were rumours that the army chief had been toppled by fellow generals,[14] highlighting the poor morale of the military,

which is reported to be at an all-time low. This decline has led to young people being forcibly conscripted into its armed forces.[15] The military's capacities for personnel are exhausted and overstretched, making it unable to rotate or re-deploy troops or regain lost ground after three and a half years of fighting on various fronts.[16]

The junta is desperately trying to gain international recognition to officially and unequivocally represent the country to the outside world. Besides North Korea, Russia and China, it remains almost completely isolated in the international arena. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine also ties up Russian war material, which, in turn, means that less military equipment can be delivered to Myanmar. Still, as a Washington Post article notes, rebel advances have been increasingly halted recently due to the military's deployment of superior drones received from Russia.[17] Faced with a lack of alternatives, a shortage of hard currency and tight international sanctions, Myanmar's generals are now turning to North Korea for the purchase of weapons. Despite these developments, predictions of the junta's imminent collapse are premature and misleading, as the Tatmadaw still has many soldiers within its ranks and military-technical superiority, not to mention a climate of fear cascading down the hierarchy.

Since the coup, ASEAN has not made much progress in dealing with Myanmar.

Regional-led Solutions for Myanmar?

A few months after the coup, in April 2021, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Myanmar junta agreed on a so-called "Five-Point Consensus". Myanmar is one of the ten Member States of ASEAN, and therefore, the EU, US and neighbouring countries have expressed an expectation that conflict resolution must be ASEAN-centred and ASEAN-led.

The "consensus" included an immediate end to violence in the country, dialogue among all parties, the appointment of a special envoy, humanitarian aid from ASEAN and a visit by the special envoy to Myanmar to meet with all parties. However, after only two days, the Tatmadaw said that "ASEAN's proposals would be considered when the situation stabilises" and that "the restoration of law and order" would be given priority.[18] Similarly, in October 2021, the junta refused to allow the ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar to visit ASSK and other detained members of the democratically legitimised government – a precondition for his visit, which was subsequently cancelled.[19]

At the highly anticipated ASEAN Summit in September 2023 under Indonesia's presidency[20], agreement was reached on a paragraph in the final declaration. Still, ASEAN has not been able to make much progress in dealing with Myanmar since the coup.

With Laos as chair, expectations of a regional-led solution were low in 2024, as the country was mainly imitating Cambodia to engage with the generals following a quiet diplomacy approach. For the first time since ASEAN barred Myanmar from sending political representatives in 2021, Laos, as chair, invited a high-level representative from Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is linked to the military.[21]

ASEAN leaders remain divided on how to deal with the crisis in Myanmar, largely because of the diverse political systems within the association – ranging from democracies like Indonesia to autocracies like Cambodia and conservative monarchies like Brunei – or historical ties with the generals in Nay Pyi Taw. For example, former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen paid a visit to the military regime in 2021, and Thailand's former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (who also rose to power through a coup in 2014) maintained contacts with the military government; actions that were heavily criticised by Indonesia and Malaysia which advocated a stricter and more decisive stance against the junta. Fast forward, with Paetongtarn Shinawatra in Thailand,

who assumed premiership of the country in August 2024 and the transition of leadership in Singapore with Prime Minister Lawrence Wong taking over in May, some new impulses were secretly hoped for. However, it never went beyond wishful thinking.

China has a strong influence on Myanmar's domestic politics.

While the issue of Myanmar notably receives centre stage in ASEAN Summits or Foreign Ministers' Meetings in an attempt to showcase and promote "unity", a breakthrough within ASEAN seems highly unrealistic. The joint communiqué during Indonesia's chairmanship in 2023 already hinted at ASEAN's inability to solve this "internal crisis" in Myanmar, acknowledging that it was time to invite external actors. This now becomes more realistic with Thailand's push for an informal ASEAN ministerial-level consultation on Myanmar in mid-December, potentially opening the forum to neighbouring actors such as China and India. China has a strong influence on Myanmar's domestic politics thanks to longstanding relationships with ethnic organisations along its border and the generals in the capital.[22]

In 2025, Malaysia will hold the fifth chairmanship to oversee the crisis in Myanmar since the coup in 2021.[23] Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who has been very focal on foreign policy to date, is expected to reiterate the Myanmar issue. Still, without the consent

United only for the photo? ASEAN remains divided on how to deal with the crisis in Myanmar. Photo: © Media Center of ASEAN Summits, Xinhua, picture alliance.

(unanimity) of the ten members, a single member state cannot accomplish much.

The Way Ahead

Prompted by the above-cited military victories in the ethnic states and the absence of talks between the fighting parties, most ethnic revolutionary organisations are attempting to become de facto states in their controlled areas and have already begun to organise interim arrangements. As noted, some ethnic states in the north, northeast and east of the country have fiercely resisted military rule since independence and fought for self-determination and greater autonomy. The objective of becoming a de-facto state now seems more feasible than ever.

The majority of Myanmar decided to plan for a military-free future and a complete restructuring of the polity.

Ethnic states have been providing basic government services such as security, education and health in their area of control. In Shan State and the Kokang Self-Administered Zone for example, "parallel structures" have emerged over the years. The Karen National Union's territory has vastly expanded since the military coup. If the many ethnic armed organisations continue to join the armed resistance alongside the PDF and continue to set aside their at times disputing and conflicting claims, they could greatly contribute towards ending military rule in Myanmar. While some ethnicities and groups in Myanmar are now actually seeking greater autonomy, democratisation and federalism, including a possible secession from Myanmar in a separate state, other groups primarily want to expand their territories and sphere of influence.

It is important to acknowledge that debates are already being held about a "post-war state" or "post-junta Myanmar", referring to a time when the military is defeated or no longer in an influential position. Actors are calling for greater control over the country's resources, fairer representation in parliament and a true federal system that confers more decision-making power on ethnic states. These and similar demands were already raised during Myanmar's post independence negotiations – in the formation and discussion of the Union of Burma (the country's former name) based on the Panglong Agreement – revisited in the Panglong Peace Conferences under Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD from 2016 onwards and are now being addressed once again.

Unsurprisingly, the military has different plans: the junta will be trying to conduct a census in 2025 ahead of the planned elections in November to gain legitimacy.[24] The military currently controls less than half of the country and the majority of Myanmar decided to plan for a military-free future and a complete restructuring of the polity. An election conducted under the military regime would be anything but free and fair. The international community should be on guard though, as some countries (also in ASEAN) may seek this as a welcoming option to normalise their ties with Myanmar.[25]

At the same time, the military is systematically eradicating the NLD's top officials, one by one, by withholding vital medical treatment from the detained NLD members. Four of its ageing leaders have died, while three others have been imprisoned. U Nyan Win, a senior adviser to deposed leader ASSK, died from a COVID-19 infection in Yangon's Insein Prison. Monya Aung Shin, a senior leader and spokesperson died from a heart attack one month after he was released from an interrogation centre in Yangon. Zaw Myint Maung, NLD vice-chairman and former chief minister of Mandalay Region, succumbed to leukemia, having been denied adequate medical treatment. The 79-year-old State Councillor ASSK, 71-year-old President Win Myint and 83-year-old NLD patron Win Htein are still imprisoned, raising concerns over their health among the people. At Zaw Myint Maung's funeral, some 10,000 people gathered to pay their respects, despite military pressure.

Germany, along with its European and international partners, accompanied and supported the country in its gradual political transformation and opening via the provision of development assistance and notably also facilitated the Panglong Peace Conferences based on the NCA. Ideally, this should have contributed to a national reconciliation.

It is impressive to see how the brief period of openness under the NLD has helped the population to embrace democratic and liberal principles. This development became noticeable after the 2021 coup and led to reactions ranging from an initial civil disobedience movement and widespread peaceful protests on the streets to the creation of the PDF and the formation of alliances between armed ethnic organisations.

A solution to the conflict must be driven primarily by neighbouring countries, while the international community has a responsibility to raise awareness about this increasingly overlooked conflict, too. As the coup recedes into the past, Myanmar risks becoming a "silent conflict" far away from the attention given to Gaza and Ukraine. Yet, it is still characterised by immense suffering for all its people – Bamar and ethnic minorities alike – the future of whom is denied by the junta's sheer intransigence.

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Photo: © Nick Kaiser, dpa, picture-alliance.

From Myth to Drama

The Forgotten Crisis in Cuba

Maximilian Strobel

The Cuban crisis[1] has been going on for decades. One low point follows the next. The mass exodus is bleeding the socialist "paradise" in the Caribbean dry, and every relevant development speaks against the survival of the repressive party dictatorship, which, however, stubbornly clings on to power. New geopolitical alliances could even prop up the regime, but there will not be much left of the population.

Historical Context

Cuba is a romantic myth, a political, social and historical symbol that has captivated people for centuries for a variety of reasons. The largest island in the Caribbean, located just 90 kilometres south of the Florida coast, is also of particular geostrategic importance, which almost led to a nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 at the peak of the Cold War.

At the beginning of the *conquista*, the Spanish conquest of the New World, Christopher Columbus "discovered" the island of "Colba", as it was probably called by the indigenous peoples, as part of his first voyage in 1492. The conquerors then subjugated the local Taíno tribes and gradually cemented their bloody rule over their land. As so often in the course of the *conquista*, the indigenous peoples had little to oppose the enslavement by the Spaniards and the diseases introduced (including measles and smallpox); barely 100 years later, they were virtually extinct.

Until Cuba's independence at the end of the 19th century, the Spanish crown used the strategically located island as a trading centre between its colonies and Europe as well as a starting point for further expeditions. Even though local gold deposits had been quickly exhausted, lively trading activities ensured prosperity, which aroused the interest of other powers such as Great Britain and France or attracted pirate fleets. Thus, the island of Cuba was repeatedly fought over in the course of time.

The German polymath and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt also travelled to Cuba on his expeditions, where he first set foot on land in 1801. His influential Political Essay on the Island of Cuba later took a critical look at the social and natural implications of colonial rule, in particular the (now African) slave trade and the unsustainable sugar cane monoculture. Von Humboldt predicted that unjust, unnatural social conditions would become unsustainable and would be eliminated by revolutions, and he was proven right.[2]

After the countries of South and Central America had gained independence from Spain in the course of the 19th century, Cuba became the most important colony of the Spanish crown. However, dissatisfaction of the Creoles (Cuban-born descendants of the Spaniards) with the ruling Spanish class grew and repeated slave revolts (of the Afro-Cubans), which were suppressed by colonial troops, foreshadowed the island's fate.

Three long, bloody wars and support from the US were to point the way out of Spanish colonial rule. In addition to humanitarian reasons, economic and strategic interests also played a role in the United States' decision to support the Cubans in their fight for "independence". The aim was to gain lasting political influence and give US companies a free hand in the Cuban economy. Although Cuba formally became independent in 1902, the US secured its own means of control, for example, through a permanent right to intervene if its interests were impaired, or the lease of Guantánamo Bay; this

open-ended treaty still exists today and can only be terminated by mutual agreement.

The communist revolution (circa 1953 to 1959) of the young lawyer Fidel Castro and his followers against the military dictator Fulgencio Batista was a catastrophe for US interests in view of the fragile global political situation and the ideological systemic struggle with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Despite many attempts, it was not possible to eliminate Castro or free Cuba from his dictatorship. For this reason, and to this day, Cuba is the revolutionary myth par excellence for many people around the world: the "Gallic village" that rebelled against imperialist US hegemony, and, despite the United States' superiority, could never be subjugated again.

The Cuban economy is producing less today than it did in 1989.

In reality, however, Cuba's recent history is a social drama in countless acts, (further) proof of the seemingly inevitable failure of socialist planned economies, and a prime example of a totalitarian system that snatched freedom from the people in the name of equality and ended up losing it all: freedom, equality, dignity and prosperity – all sacrificed by the limitless will to stay in power. The supposedly noble ideals of the revolution were betrayed, and the result today could hardly be worse.

Cuba Today: Facets of the Crisis

People have long become accustomed to the "Cuban crisis". The situation on the island is a humanitarian drama, a permanent crisis that has flown under the radar for a long time. Hardly any news from Cuba is still capable of causing shock. Many in the West, be it politicians or the media, have implicitly given up on the country and its suffering population, shrugging their shoulders, because much has been tried over the years and it has been repeatedly claimed that this regime should fall at any moment, but it never did.

Between the beginning of 2023 and mid-2024, more than one million Cubans left the island, which corresponds to a population decline of around ten per cent.[3] The phenomenon of emigration is not new. However, it has rapidly gained momentum due to the violent suppression of demonstrations in the summer of 2021. Around 1,400 people were arrested at the time, many of whom are still imprisoned today in appalling conditions. The people are clearly voting with their feet on the state repression and the severe supply crisis in the country.

Extreme poverty among the Cuban population is staggeringly high at just under 90 per cent, and living conditions deteriorate with every survey.[4] The food crisis is an existential problem, with seven out of ten people skipping at least one meal a day. Inflation and the unaffordable cost of living, combined with rampant corruption, make a living in humane conditions unthinkable for large sections of the population. Cubans who are lucky enough to have family or friends abroad (usually in the US) keep their heads above water with foreign remittances *(remesas)*. The once vaunted healthcare system has long been unworthy of its name. Medicines are as scarce as food. The regime is barely able to send doctors to the world's crisis regions as part of its once internationally renowned health diplomacy, but it can send doctors to Mexico, which is difficult to communicate even there.[5]

How can such a system still hold up, and how can it be that even the former achievements of the revolution – health, education or the social system – have been completely eroded by the (homemade) economic crisis?

Hunger

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 plunged Cuba into economic ruin, as the island was completely dependent on Soviet subsidies: the Cuban economy still produces less today than it did in 1989. The ensuing crisis, euphemistically labelled

by the Castro regime as a "special period", was supposed to be a historic low point. Meanwhile, however, the hardship is even more pronounced for a large part of the population. Even the sugar industry has imploded, and the government has to import almost all goods, which in turn fails due to the chronic lack of foreign currency. Officials speak of a "war economy". Eggs, milk, rice, flour, vegetables – everyday products are only available on the black market and at eye-watering prices.

Videos are circulating on the internet of people cutting up dead animals in broad daylight; according to official figures, this is said to have happened hundreds of thousands of times in 2023. Such *hurtos y sacrificios* are symptoms of the dramatic economic crisis and incipient famine. Even if the regime is practising calculated optimism, the official discourse cannot conceal the actual supply situation, the regular shortages and the high inflation.[6] In February 2024, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) received its first request from the Cuban government for supplies of powdered milk to feed children under the age of seven.[7]

The 1.6 million pensioners in the country, whose pensions are not nearly enough to live in dignity, are particularly affected by the emergency situation. Former professional athlete Manuel Cuña Regil, who won many national and international

Courage born of desperation: Despite the prospect of arrest, opposition members in Cuba continue to protest against what they see as an inhumane dictatorship. Some, like Boris González Arenas (pictured), have lost count of how many times they have been in the regime's prisons. Photo: © Ramon Espinosa, AP, picture alliance.

medals, talks about his life of poverty in old age. The 74-year-old continues to work as a martial arts instructor to supplement his small pension. The house in which the single Cuban lives, in a poor neighbourhood 20 minutes from Havana's old town, is on the brink of collapse. Holes in the walls and roof cause unhealthy humidity. His most valuable possession, a fridge, usually remains empty. Twice a week, Manuel walks about two and a half kilometres to reach the only place where he can get a free lunch; sometimes he only eats part of the meagre portions so that he has something left over in the evening. Life has become unaffordable and impossible, he explains. There has been no attempt to build up stocks or reserves for a long time.

1.2 per cent of the budget is invested in education, 33 per cent in tourism.

70 per cent of people in Cuba who receive state pensions obtain the monthly minimum of 1,528 pesos: this is equivalent to around 5.39 US dollars on the black market. The state pays widowed pensioners 1,070 pesos: 3.78 US dollars. The state openly admits that incomes and pensions are insufficient because the constant loss of purchasing power is simply too high. So it is sold as good news when tens of thousands of pensioners have to start working again.

Education

Cuban schools and educational institutions are in a disastrous state. A central pillar of the revolution was free and good education for all: "No school without teachers, no child without school" was Fidel Castro's slogan back in 1994. Today, this promise seems more distant than ever. The state of a maltreated infrastructure has reached its (temporary?) lowest point. 30 years after Castro's statement, parents report untenable conditions in their children's schools: dilapidated buildings, wet walls and unhygienic conditions in schools that cannot be used when it rains. Where the state fails, parents sometimes step in and paint or renovate buildings themselves, but this is only possible if someone has access to paint or building materials, which is by no means a given. Above all, this private, self-responsible commitment should not be necessary according to the regime's ideological self-image.

It is not easy to precisely determine what the government is still investing in the education sector's infrastructure, even if there are some indications. The National Statistics and Information Authority states that 1.2 per cent of the available budget was invested in education in 2022; 33 per cent of the same budget was apparently invested in the tourism sector. The lack of investment is not only reflected in the quality of school buildings or the availability of teaching materials such as books, exercise books and pencils, which often have to be shared by several children, but of course also in the remuneration and quality of teaching.

Teachers earn very low wages, even by Cuban standards; in 2023, salaries in the education sector were among the lowest of all: between 3,800 and 4,500 pesos, which, depending on the exchange rate on the black market, equated to around 15 US dollars – per month. Even if the state is now attempting to counteract this, for example by paying for overtime, the estimated shortfall of 17,000 teachers is hardly surprising in view of these amounts. To counteract the shortage of teachers, students are being brought into schools and the recognition of exams is being simplified. However, a logical consequence of these measures is a further decline in the quality of teaching. As a result, the performance of candidates at the country's universities is also noticeably decreasing. In 2023, only 50.4 per cent of school leavers and applicants passed the three central entrance exams at state universities, nine per cent fewer than in the previous year.

As in virtually every problem area, the government's official strategy seems to be to deny the actual situation and point to the "high quality of the Cuban system" or the "great developments

of the revolutionary decades". Yet, this can no longer fool anyone and reports of high demand for English lessons suggest that the urban classes in particular, who have a bit more financial means or internet access, know how to help themselves outside the ailing system and are making plans to escape it.

Health

It should now come as no surprise that Cuban healthcare also no longer meets humane standards and demands. A decade ago, Cuba was still regarded internationally as a country with difficulties, but as a medical power. Today, the situation in this sector is precarious, too; there are almost no medicines and ever fewer doctors and medical professionals. Obtaining specific, appropriate treatments for serious diseases is hardly realistic. The lack of medicine and food means that emigration, sometimes on humanitarian visas, is often the only way out in the event of illness.

The renowned oncologist Dr Elias Gracia Medina reports that, according to the incidence figures, a cancer is diagnosed in Cuba about every 20 minutes and that more than 140 people succumb to cancer every day. People with such a serious illness are particularly at risk due to the country's miserable healthcare situation.

Expressions of dissent against the political leadership are nipped in the bud.

Other doctors are also reporting intolerable conditions: overcrowding in doctors' clinics, poor pay and working conditions that make it difficult to practise. Nevertheless, some continue to work after their retirement in order to offset the structural shortage of staff, similar to what the country's teachers do. One retired neurologist, for instance, talks about how he attends acquaintances and people from the neighbourhood at his home. Having said this, he cannot help with medication either; the patients are sent to the black market with his recommendations and have to help themselves there if possible. That is, if they can afford the horrendous prices.

Following a grotesque logic, medical institutions sometimes refuse to use products purchased elsewhere despite the serious lack of their own resources, for safety reasons. This means that patients are not operated on because medical products are unavailable, be it medication or surgical material. If patients or relatives now buy these products themselves and pay absurd prices for them on the black market, clinics refuse to use them because the origin of the products is unclear.

Between 2010 and 2022, 63 hospitals were closed, 37 GP clinics, 187 facilities for pregnant women and 45 dental clinics, according to official figures from the National Statistics and Information Authority. In 2022, there was 22.5 per cent less public investment in the Cuban healthcare sector than in the previous year (now 9.6 per cent of GDP; in comparison: Germany 12.8 per cent).[8] In the same year, there were 46,663 fewer available employees in the various healthcare professions than in 2021; among others, 12,000 doctors and 7,000 nurses left the profession or went abroad.

The reasons for this are as obvious as they are interdependent. The emigration crisis plays a central role, often exacerbated by inadequate salaries and disastrous working conditions. A government response to the situation? Medical staff have recently been authorised to take on several jobs at the same time.

The Price of Political Opposition

Social rights are non-existent in the socialist Republic of Cuba. Expressions of dissent against the political leadership under President Díaz-Canel are nipped in the bud with draconian punishments. At the same time, the population's disapproval of the tottering, frail ruling class could hardly be higher.

There are many organisations and individuals, both inside and outside the island, who tirelessly draw attention to the population's dramatic living conditions. Yet, due to the repressive nature of the regime and the political and economic isolation, this is associated with considerable difficulties and dangers for those who remain. Many critics and members of the opposition left the country years ago, some forced, some of their own volition, for example to nearby Miami, from where a fragmented opposition of Cuban emigrants is trying to coordinate with each other and with the few who remain. How long can this go on? Some of the regime's opponents have lived outside Cuba longer than they have ever lived there. The few who still stood up to Castro and his troops have long been on their way to follow him into eternity. How resilient is this dictatorship? Seemingly infinite.

The surveillance state not only focuses on individuals, but also on families.

Reminiscing the "good old days": Relations between Cuba and Russia have recently been revitalised, including by a visit of Russian war ships to the Caribbean. Photo: © Irina Shatalova, TASS, dpa, picture alliance.

Despite all the problems and years of deprivation, despite state oppression and a tightly meshed surveillance apparatus that leaves hardly any room to breathe and think freely, there are Cuban activists who persevere in their homeland, who rebel against the regime and refuse to accept the Communist Party dictatorship.

Boris González Arenas is a well-known voice of the opposition.[9] He was arrested many times, he estimates up to 18 times but does not know for sure; in any case, he spent a lot of time in custody. A photo of his arrest on 11 May 2019 became known around the world; it radiates both great strength and great despair and captivates the viewer who knows the context of the image. That day, he and many of his friends and activists took part in a march by the LGBT community against homophobia, which had previously been banned by the authorities. The ban characterised the repressive course of the regime, which does not allow any expression of opinion in the public sphere that has not been approved in advance and is in line with the directives of the state, i.e. the party.

Boris González Arenas primarily sees himself as a political activist against the Cuban dictatorship and the opposition as a core part of his identity. He is a historian and an independent journalist. When asked about his main goal, he prioritises bringing about an end to the oppressive regime in which he lives with his family – a regime not only against freedom or democracy, but, as he believes, a regime against humanity. He is convinced that the problems of all Cubans stem from the loss of humanity experienced by his country. How do you come to join the opposition in a country where, according to official "law" and narrative, there is no opposition?

The opposition activist accounts how, as a young man, he felt that his homeland had lost its way. Years later, in the face of injustices suffered by others, he decided to take the step of public demonstration or opposition. What free democracies take for granted, is a radical step in Cuba, as the surveillance state not only focuses on individuals, but also on families. There are many ways to oppose the system in Cuba. There are countless types of passive and active resistance, but the consequences for dissidents are often serious.

While some paid for their activism with their lives – such as Oswaldo Payá and Orlando Zapata[10] – Boris González Arenas lost his job at the International Film School, where he worked as a lecturer, in 2015. The pressure exerted by the state on defectors is particularly catastrophic for families and children, a fact Boris González Arenas knows from his own experience. Grief and fear felt by the family when the father or the mother disappears again is unbearable for many. To protect themselves from the regime, some activists take their relatives abroad or even refrain from starting their own family altogether. That is a price that some are prepared to pay for the hope of freedom in their own country.

Hugo Chávez was able to use Venezuelan oil to keep Cuba's regime afloat, at least temporarily.

Cuba in the International System

Cuba is rather isolated in the international context. Under President Eisenhower, the US imposed a trade embargo[11] on the island, which the Cuban regime still makes responsible for all economic ills. Although its allies Venezuela, Nicaragua, Russia and China trade with the island and mitigate the consequences of the US embargo, some of them are pariah states themselves. Cuba has an enormous foreign trade deficit, with imports exceeding meagre exports many times over.[12] The horrendous foreign debts mostly remain unserviced, which does not exactly increase its standing among lenders.

Venezuela, which has strong ideological ties, still maintains a close relationship with Havana. After coming to power in 1999, Hugo Chávez was able to use Venezuelan oil to keep the like-minded

regime afloat, at least temporarily. However, due to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, the autocratic government of Nicolás Maduro is no longer in a position to grant such favours.

Since the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the Putin regime has been more active in its search for new partners and is intensifying its historical relations with Cuba once again. Both countries want to move closer together economically and in terms of security policy.[13] The consequences of this rapprochement have recently become visible in the presence of Russian warships in Cuba.[14]

Cooperation with the People's Republic of China is cultivated, too, as Beijing and Havana are ideologically close, since both countries are controlled by communist one-party regimes. As a sign of "friendship", China brought food and medical products to the island in spring 2024.[15] However, it is well known that cooperation with or support from China comes at a price. Cuba's geographical location and proximity to the US is of great strategic value for espionage activities, so it is not surprising that China probably has access to some facilities with the appropriate technology.[16] Against the backdrop of tense relations between the two superpowers, this is seen by Washington as a serious threat to national security, and cooperation between Cuba and China is being monitored extremely closely.

The communist planned economy has produced more suffering and hunger than equality and solidarity.

In its search for allies, Cuba is also trying to move closer to the "BRICS plus" association of states, which is being actively expanded by Russia and China and is intended to represent a geopolitical counterweight to the liberal West. The island nation takes part in meetings of the association and applied for membership in October 2024.[17] We can assume that the aim is to gain access to economic support and diplomatic alliances. In times of increasing polarisation in the international system, Cuba would certainly do well to forge alliances. It is doubtful, however, that this will allow the multiple domestic problems to continue to be ignored.

Cuba's precarious economic and social situation may also be explained by the US trade embargo, but it is certainly not exclusively due to this external factor. The embargo seriously impedes access to global markets and financial flows, but many of the country's profound economic and social problems stem from internal mismanagement and the rigid structures of a dysfunctional regime. Owing to the centralised planned economy, the corrupt political class retains total control over industries, resources and property, and prevents any innovation for fear of losing power. Cuba's relations with allies such as Russia, China and Venezuela mitigate some of the effects, but cannot remedy structural deficits. Without far-reaching reforms, Cuba is unlikely to achieve long-term economic stability even if all sanctions were lifted.

Conclusion

Cuba is a story of eternal deprivation, the arbitrary exercise of power and of complete absence of Rule of Law, but also a story of people's eternal hope for freedom. Of course, today it is easy to state that the Cuban revolution has failed, that the communist planned economy (again in this case) has produced more suffering and hunger than equality and solidarity.

The Cuban economy has hit rock bottom, agriculture is extremely unproductive and not even remotely capable of feeding its own people. Almost everything has to be imported, but the regime does not have the necessary foreign currency and is trying, ironically, to earn it in a decidedly capitalist way. Apart from cigars, rum and some nickel, not much of value is exported. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has also been a lack of tourism, which is vital for survival and was at least able to flush a

few dollars into the tormented country. And yet, even after 65 years, the Communist Party apparatus still seems to be firmly in control.

The human exodus in particular is a vicious circle. As described here in relation to various elementary sectors, the situation continues to deteriorate with each wave of emigration: teachers are leaving, further reducing the low quality and availability of education. Doctors and medical staff are leaving their profession or home country due to overwork and the structural shortage, which hardly improves the situation for those who remain. And logically, young people with hope and a future are the first to leave.

Donald Trump's re-election has dashed all hopes of a relaxation of the US economic embargo, for example for humanitarian reasons or strategic interests. The first signs are clear: maximum pressure is to be exerted on Cuba and Venezuela – and it is primarily the civilian population that will pay the price.

– translated from German –

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Do you understand Spanish and want to know more about the subject? Then listen to the four-part podcast series "Radiografía de Cuba", available on Spotify at https://ogy.de/j823

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1 In the summer of 2024, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in Mexico, in cooperation with the independent multimedia platform elTOQUE, which is primarily dedicated to Cuba, and MUAD, a political alliance for the restoration of Cuban democracy, published a four-part Spanish-language podcast series called "Radiografía de Cuba", which aims to reflect the real living conditions and challenges of the population in a way that is as unfiltered as possible. Representations, data and information not otherwise labelled are based on this podcast.

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The New Normal

South Asia's (Almost) Forgotten Climate Crisis and Europe's Responsibility

Frederick Kliem / Timm Anton

South Asia is particularly vulnerable to climate change and is thus frequently affected by heatwaves and extreme weather events – a situation that will only deteriorate. Local governments are addressing this challenge, but national efforts alone will not suffice. The region affords a great opportunity for green development, but is also characterised by poverty, poor governance and conflict. It is both a moral imperative and realist policy for the great historical polluters, such as Europe, to support South Asia in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

The Great Collective Action Dilemma

The blatantly obvious facts underpinning the climate crisis, the rather simple science behind it and the horrific consequences are neither a secret nor particularly difficult to comprehend. And yet, the message has failed to hit home. Organisations and individuals with great authority, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), document, analyse and warn against anthropogenic damage to planetary health and portend the repercussions of anthropogenic climate change, such as heatwaves and wet-bulb temperatures[1], permanent loss of biodiversity, wildfires, tropical storms, the acidification of oceans and rising sea levels. Secondary consequences include the perpetuation of under-development in badly affected regions as well as unprecedented mass migration from tropical and dry (e.g. South Asia) towards temperate climate zones (e.g. Europe).

The list goes on – and so do anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that are accelerating global warming. We can reasonably conclude that these anthropogenic emissions are not exclusively but predominantly the result of a still increasing burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) for both energy consumption and production of plastic, steel and more. This process releases carbon dioxide (CO_2) into the atmosphere, trapping heat and thereby increasing global land surface and oceanic temperatures at an alarming rate. At the same time, natural CO_2 sinks are reduced at similarly drastic rates through deforestation and acidification of maritime spaces.

As a result, 2023 was the hottest year on record and probably in over one hundred thousand years, with the global average near-surface temperature at 1.45 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial baseline.[2] As the world registered its two hottest days on record in just two consecutive days in July 2024 (17.09 and 17.15 degrees Celsius), 2024 will trump 2023.[3]

At the same time, the world – or rather the top 20 emitting economies – continue to emit ever-greater quantities of GHG. Current atmospheric CO_2 levels, the main heat-trapping GHG, are at approximately 423 parts per million (ppm) – 50 per cent higher than pre-industrial levels and the highest concentration of atmospheric CO_2 in about two million years.[4] At the same time, the pressure on energy supply chains has shifted the balance between climate and energy security policies in favour of the latter, once again promoting the ostensible virtues of fossil energy sources, and coal in particular. Meanwhile, climate change continues relentlessly. The curve is, thus, not even bending yet.

While climate sensitivity – the relationship between GHG emissions and surface temperatures – is not entirely clear, albeit proven to be causal, the 1.5 degrees Celsius target often associated with the Paris Accord is far from

reach. With current policies in place, 3 degrees Celsius is a likely scenario, and even if all states were to meet their climate pledges, which they are not even close to, 2.5 degrees Celsius would be a more realistic outcome. So-called one-hundred year floods are becoming 30-year floods, extreme heatwaves, droughts and wet-bulb temperatures increase in frequency, and crucial tipping points are already reached, including a loss of ice sheets in the Arctic during summer, rising sea levels and permanently uninhabitable spaces. Much faster progress on a much larger scale is needed in protecting our climate.[5]

South Asia contributes only marginally to anthropogenic climate change.

Yet, little attention is paid to this most fundamental crisis, and there is correspondingly little apparent urgency on the part of policy makers in industrialised economies to pursue mitigation efforts. Benefit-maximising behaviour trumps the urgency to pursue the just-about-tolerable path of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. After all, global warming is the ultimate free-rider problem. Cutting GHG emissions gives rise to economic and social costs for the state – at least in the near term – while the benefits of this cut would mostly be felt elsewhere. And vice versa, the consequences of emitting GHG in the atmosphere, the global commons, are felt globally, not nationally. Economists call this "negative externalities": planetary costs are borne by society, not by the party causing them. In other words, while economic benefits are individualised, the planetary costs are socialised. Climate change is therefore the ultimate collective action problem.

The Consequences of Climate Change in South Asia

In Europe, climate change and the global warming that causes it are still relatively abstract threats. But for many countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the threat is as real as it is imminent. Arguably nowhere more so than in South Asia, which is one of the world's most affected regions when it comes to weather and climate disasters. Here, the consequences of ever-increasing temperatures impact two billion people, one-fourth of the world's population – the most densely populated region in the world. Experiences with climate change and its consequences are similar across South Asia; this predominantly entails increases in both occurrence and intensity of heavy rains and floods, heat waves, cyclones, droughts and devastated ecosystems, creating economic and indeed human losses, food insecurity, uninhabitable spaces and forced migration. At the same time, with its low GHG emissions and large CO_2 sinks, South Asia contributes only marginally to anthropogenic climate change.

In 2022, Pakistan was hit by devastating floods and it was not the first time. This was a "climate-induced, humanitarian disaster of epic proportions" according to the government,[6] caused by a severe heatwave that melted glaciers and excessively high monsoon rains that were fed by increasingly moist air. The floods badly affected 33 million Pakistanis – about the entire population of Poland – with over 2,000 deaths and eight million internally displaced people (IDP), 15 billion US dollars in economic loss and a recovery fund amounting to 16 billion US dollars.[7] And more severe floods have occurred since then, most notably in 2023 and 2024 in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

The monsoon, which shapes South Asia's weather, seasons and culture, is a complex system that is undergoing dramatic change over a short period of time. As the air is getting hotter and thus holds more humidity, monsoon patterns are changing, becoming more erratic, less dependable, and – as the example in Pakistan shows – more dangerous.[8] While the monsoon itself brings devastating rains, the pre-monsoon season brings prolonged heatwaves across the region. The 2024 pre-monsoon brought record-breaking heatwaves, when parts

of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan recorded temperatures above 45 degrees Celsius, some parts above 50 degrees Celsius. In South Asia's climate, sweat cannot evaporate in moisture-saturated air, and therefore does not cool the body. The "wet-bulb temperature" effect means that temperatures in South Asia above roughly 40 degrees Celsius cause excess heat deaths among children and the elderly, prevent children from attending school and virtually halt all outdoor activity and agricultural productivity, threatening food and economic security in parts of South Asia that are already poor. These heat records are now being broken almost every year.

A significant number of South Asians live in coastal cities along the Bay of Bengal.

In Nepal, among the most vulnerable countries in the world, climate change brings severe winter droughts and excessive monsoon flooding. The important winter season is becoming warmer and drier, bringing forest fires, melting glaciers and changing flora and fauna. Dry winters have a detrimental effect on the already astonishingly poor air quality – a phenomenon that anyone who has experienced a recent winter in Kathmandu can attest to. Two decades ago, mosquitoes were unheard of in the foothills of the Himalayas, whereas the mosquito-borne dengue is now an increasingly common deadly disease in this region as it gets warmer and wetter. During training conducted by the Regional Programme Energy Security and Climate Change Asia-Pacific (RECAP) of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung with locals in remote villages in these areas, small-hold farmers reported recent changes to their environment that presented a perfect summary of the climate change phenomenon; even though none of the farmers were aware of the concept of climate change at all. Besides the new occurrence of mosquitoes, other examples include unknown pests and overall decreasing harvest yields for previously fertile plants. The extensive use of pesticides and fertilisers is now imperative.

Likewise, the Tibetan Plateau, located at the intersection of Central, South and East Asia,

Devastating consequences: A Nepalese woman sits in front of her flood-damaged home in October 2024. Photo: © Ambir Tolang, NurPhoto, picture alliance.

is becoming warmer and wetter. The area is the source of some of the region's major rivers, including the Mekong, Yangtze and Yalu River as well as Indus and Ganges. Whereas melting glaciers will raise water levels of the Mekong, Yangtze and Yalu River, the southern outflow regions are expected to experience a decline, resulting in critical water shortages for India, threatening irrigation, drinking water, industry, navigation and hydropower.[9]

A significant number of South Asians live in coastal cities, many of them along the Bay of Bengal – the world's largest bay. Many of these coastal cities have populations well above ten million, and the four largest (Karachi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Dhaka) are home to the equivalent of the entire population of France. As sea levels rise and tropical cyclones increase in severity due to warming oceans (the Indian Ocean is already one degree Celsius warmer than during

Rice terraces in Bhutan: The country has become "net-negative", as its economy offsets more CO_2 than it emits, thanks to sequestration by vast protected forests and exports of renewable electricity. Photo: © Eric Lafforgue, Hans Lucas, picture alliance.

the pre-industrial period), the force of climate change will increasingly drive migration away from these densely populated centres.

Climate change is one of the crucial drivers of migration in the 21st century.

This list is far from complete. But all these examples demonstrate the extent and urgency of the challenge. And RECAP's numerous engagements with South Asian stakeholders clearly show that both the public and the political and security establishment in South Asia are acutely aware that the anthropogenic climate crisis is the greatest security, economic and social crisis of all. In fact, discussions with the security community in Pakistan and Sri Lanka confirm that climate-induced threats to national security are high on national security agendas. And yet, this South Asian "new normal" tests the limits of governments. Ongoing rampant poverty, political and economic instability, the absence of regional cooperation and often modest local governance capacity impede Disaster Risk Management (DRM) and adaptation measures, despite substantial national efforts.[10] In particular, the immediate impacts of extreme weather-related events require proper national DRM and functioning regional mechanisms for emergency relief.

The long-term impact, for example on migration or overall economic development, will be even harder to tackle: a changing climate and the increasingly extreme weather events have devastating effects on both the economy and, even worse, on the socio-economic well-being of a large and already struggling population. Economic fallouts for South Asia due to climate change are difficult to estimate in precise figures,

but most approximations lie at around one trillion US dollars. The World Bank estimates that the repercussions of climate change in South Asia will well exceed the global average of 7 per cent GDP loss, with potential losses of 10 to 18 per cent.[11]

The agricultural sector, a major source of employment and a main guarantor of local food security, is particularly affected. Extreme weather severely curtails labour productivity, making South Asia's slow developing economies increasingly less competitive. This not only hinders growth and development, but also exacerbates socio-economic gaps in these already unequal societies. The relatively poor, often day labourers, who are predominantly employed in outdoor sectors, such as construction and agriculture, lose their income and thus the ability to sustain their families. The disproportionate impact of climate change in less developed countries in South Asia (and Africa) will further widen the development gap vis-à-vis the industrialised economies in Europe and elsewhere, which will encourage migration flows at the very least. In sum, in addition to demographic shifts as well as violence and conflict, this makes climate change one of the three crucial drivers of human migration in the 21st century. Sudden impacts like floods or seasonal draughts and slow-onset impacts like water shortages or rises in sea level make large-scale migration necessary. This has already happened in Pakistan where millions of displaced people are looking for new opportunities.

RECAP witnessed first-hand how all South Asian states are investing in mitigation and adaption and are implementing climate solutions, including reforestation, shoreline resilience, building renewable energy infrastructure and electrifying their developing economies. Bhutan has become "net-negative", as its economy offsets more CO_2 than it emits via sequestration by means of vast protected forests and exports of renewable electricity. Bhutan is indeed a small country, but so is Luxembourg, one of the highest per capita emitting economies. Rather than dismissing Bhutanese success due to its size, we should instead analyse its environmental accomplishments. These successes are mainly due to committed environmental policy making, including constitutionally anchored forest protection, prioritising renewables over fossil fuels and a ban on logging for export.

South Asian states must do more to support each other's disaster management.

Yet, regardless of domestic policy challenges, the greatest obstacle is the absence of regional cooperation; safeguarding national sovereignty as well as mutual distrust impede the sharing of best practice. A lot could be gained from a united South Asian approach towards climate change adaptation and disaster prevention. Some years ago, Pakistani and Indian climate activists managed to meet regularly and exchange notes on heat mitigation plans and reforestation strategies. The respective governments are making this exchange among civil society increasingly difficult, and India-Pakistan relations would certainly benefit from a de-securitisation of all bilateral contact. Furthermore, upstream states should share real-time data on river flows with neighbours downstream, while Himalayan states can jointly monitor glaciers and coastal states can report on weather patterns. RECAP staff witnessed first-hand the poor resources that Sri Lanka's only meteorological station has to draw on. India's far more sophisticated installations could share advanced storm warnings. This would severely limit damage from floods and cyclones and also build a basis for trust in regional cooperation. The Mekong River Commission represents an example from Southeast Asia where this joint river management works reasonably well. What is more, China has helped India and Bangladesh to enhance their flood preparedness and response strategies on the Brahmaputra River during the monsoon season, saving thousands of lives. Equally important is that regional states must do more to support each other's disaster management.

Unfortunately, that part of the world is arguably the most dysfunctional sub-region in terms of mutual trust and inter-governmental regionalism. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is de facto dysfunctional due to persistent rivalries and conflicts among its member countries, India and Pakistan in particular. Alternative mechanisms have failed to compensate for this lack of regionalism, hindering effective cooperation and decision-making across South Asia.

European Responsibility and Ecological Realism

Scaling up efforts across the region is imperative for regional resilience, and Europe has a unique responsibility to support it. This is both a matter of climate fairness as well as a realistic assessment of national interests. For one, mitigation is the primary responsibility of both historical and current emitters. The United States is the greatest accumulated polluter, and while China, India and Russia are heavy emitters, European economies as a whole are historically the second largest polluters after the US. Conversely, India aside, South Asia's emissions are negligible and must be balanced with their need for growth in order to escape still widespread poverty. And even India, the world's most populous nation, contributes "only" seven per cent to global emissions nominally and only marginally per capita.

Despite being among the great historical emitters, Europe is currently far less affected by climate change than South Asia. This costs-by-cause perspective engenders the inescapable responsibility to pursue energy transition in Europe with greater speed and vigour, but also to support developing economies in both their adaptation efforts as well as on their journey towards green development. Indeed, much of the local debate in South Asia is about loss and damages and climate justice. While it would be difficult for industrialised nations to ignore two billion people speaking as one, the absence of regional cooperation impedes this once again.

Add to this rather idealistic motivation a dose of realism: viewing the preservation of the biosphere – this extends beyond just global warming – as a core national interest, even a matter of national security. Such ecological realism recognises that humanity depends on ecological integrity as we know it and that our behaviour is critical to protecting it. Ecological realism views the preservation of planetary functions as imperative to any other national objective – not unreasonable in light of the empirical evidence of anthropogenic damage to planetary integrity.

In particular, the decreasing habitability of tropical and dry regions gives rise to immense push factors, especially in badly affected rural areas, with potential large-scale cross-border migration.[12] Large parts of central Pakistan have already become virtually uninhabitable and mass internal migration is already taking place. Despite being mainly domestic and regional at first, large-scale migration will exert substantial pressure on the capacities of South Asian countries. From a European perspective, the effects of these kinds of structural distortions in South Asia are too far-reaching to be ignored and will eventually be felt in terms of political instability across South Asia and eventual migration to Europe.

Climate action in low-emitting South Asia primarily means adaptation.

Equally realist is the recognition that energy security and climate change are inextricably linked. Production and energy consumption are the major drivers behind global warming, accounting for three quarters of GHG emissions.[13] Transforming global energy systems is essential in order to meet climate ambitions as well as to guarantee available and affordable energy, i.e. energy security. In all fairness, the European Union, through the European Investment Bank (EIB) and other channels, has significantly contributed towards renewable energy

infrastructure in South Asia. However, Europe's, and other large emitters', main way of assuming climate responsibility and ecological realism is urgent mitigation at home and abroad – a speedy and comprehensive energy transition beyond political debates about combustion engines and wind turbines. And in theory, the path is simple: the electrification of the economy coupled with a rapid super-scale roll-out of low-emission energy technology.

The cause also requires some unconventional thinking. Energy transitions have an illogically narrow national focus, given the transnational nature of GHG emissions. India is the third largest emitter in absolute numbers. The climate effect of one tonne of CO_2 emitted in India is the same as one tonne of CO_2 emitted in Germany. However, the cost of preventing the emission of this tonne is highly unequal. More specifically, if Germany invested one million euros in national energy transition by building a solar photovoltaic park, it could avoid x tonnes of GHG emissions. If Germany invested the same million euros in India, it could guarantee an emissions reduction of x times 100 due to lower labour and land costs there. Given that Germany currently accounts for two per cent of global GHG emissions and India for seven, while the effect of reducing CO_2 is independent from where it is emitted, this would be a highly worthwhile mitigation strategy. That is, if combatting global warming were indeed the primary objective.

Mitigation should also become a primary pillar of developmental models, allowing South Asian (and African) countries to seek international assistance to devise locally appropriate measures. For example, countries with CO_2 sink potential or unexploited fossil resources need to be compensated with CO_2 credit systems for large-scale reforestation, conservation and leaving fossil reserves in the ground. Industrialisation pathways should be primarily low-emissions pathways from the outset.

That notwithstanding, climate action in low-emitting South Asia primarily means adaptation. This includes climate-resilient agriculture and urban infrastructure as well as nature-based solutions to cool cities and proper water resource management. It also entails increasing the national and regional DRM and emergency response capacities.[14] Heat action plans for the construction of adequate buildings and rehabilitating water structures are becoming increasingly important in temperate climate zones, too. Intra-regional cooperation in this space can be highly beneficial. This does not absolve South Asia of its mitigation responsibility but is a call to prioritise more tailored climate action. It requires Europe to support both mitigation and adaptation in South Asia and other vulnerable regions.

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Photo: © Lina Selg / ANP, picture alliance

Crisis of International Law?

A Call for Better Expectation Management

Franziska Rinke / Philipp Bremer

International law is unable to end the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine or the conflict in the Middle East. Overall, doubts about its capabilities are growing. International law, they say, is "in crisis". But is international law really so ineffective? Is it not more a case of adapted expectation management and greater political will?

The two world wars were certainly the most far-reaching armed conflicts in modern human history. For more than seven decades after these wars, in Europe at least, people thought they were safe. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is bringing the war right to our doorstep once again. With the attack on Israel, another war has been raging in our extended neighbourhood since 7 October 2023 – involving a country that is historically particularly close to us. The terrorist organisation Hamas continues to hold 100 hostages[1] in Gaza. But even if these two wars have dominated the German media in the last two years, the list of ongoing wars and armed conflicts around the world is much longer.[2] International law (alone) cannot put an end to this immeasurable suffering. However, many people expect nothing less from it.

International Law and the Russian War of Aggression

With its full-scale attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia is once again violating the ban on the use of force recognised under international law. Article 2 No. 4 of the Charter of the United Nations (UN Charter) states: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."[3]

The prohibition of the use of force is probably the greatest achievement in international law. Military force used by one state against another is fundamentally illegal under international law. Only two exceptions are enshrined in writing: firstly, every state has the right to self-defence. Secondly, the Security Council decides on the use of military force to maintain or restore international peace and security. Waging a war of aggression is the highest crime at international level – the original sin, so to speak, which opens the door to all subsequent war crimes. The onset of the Russian aggression was quickly followed by the realisation that international law could neither end nor significantly influence this war. The International Court of Justice as well as the International Criminal Court appear to be secondary arenas.

On 26 February 2022, just two days after Russia's attack, Ukraine filed an urgent appeal and a lawsuit with the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Established in 1946 and based in the Peace Palace in The Hague, the International Court of Justice is the most important judicial body of the United Nations (UN). It hears interstate disputes and consists of 15 judges of different nationalities. However, neither Russia nor Ukraine have submitted to the jurisdiction of the ICJ. For this reason, the Court does not rule on a violation of the prohibition of the use of force, but rather on the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, as both states have signed and ratified the Genocide Convention.

According to Article IX of the Convention, the ICJ has jurisdiction in disputes between the contracting parties, too. Russia bases its war of aggression on the claim that Ukraine is committing genocide against the Russian minority in eastern Ukraine. In the main proceedings, Ukraine seeks a declaration that it is

not responsible for such a genocide. Hearings lasted five days in September 2023. Recently, the Court of Justice largely authorised the action against Russia. It will now open the main proceedings. We still have to wait for a judgement. However, on 16 March 2022, the Court ruled in an urgent application that Russia must cease its military operation immediately. There was a risk of irreparable damage to the rights of Ukraine and its people, so the ICJ accepted the request for interim measures. Evidently, Russia has failed to cooperate. The highest international judicial authority has no means of enforcement and so the destruction and killing continues unhindered before the eyes of the world community.

The International Criminal Court (ICC)[4] also launched official investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity shortly after the start of the war. In 1998, the agreement on an International Criminal Court was adopted at the UN Conference of States in Rome. The so-called Rome Statute was signed by 139 states and came into force in 2002, enabling the ICC to begin its work in The Hague in 2003. Of the 139 signatory states, 124 have ratified the international treaty to date. Germany has always been particularly committed to the work of the ICC. Unlike the ICJ, the ICC is not part of the UN, but an independent international organisation. Whereas only states can be parties before the ICJ, the ICC's achievement in terms of international law is precisely that individuals have to answer to an independent judicial institution of the international community.

Calls for a special tribunal for Ukraine were raised at an early stage.

The ICC is by no means intended to replace or review national prosecutions, but only to intervene if the country concerned is unable or unwilling to prosecute crimes committed by its own nationals. For this reason, the jurisdiction of the ICC is limited to particularly serious crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression. Within a few days of 24 February 2022, a total of 43 states had referred the investigations to the Chief Prosecutor, which had never happened before in such numbers. On 17 March 2023, the ICC issued an international arrest warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Commissioner for Children's Rights, Mariya Lvova-Belova. Both are allegedly responsible for the war crime of the unlawful expulsion and transfer of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories of Ukraine to the Russian Federation.[5] Further arrest warrants followed, including one for former Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu. The accused are not expected to be arrested in the near future, however.

Calls for a special tribunal[6] for Ukraine were also raised at an early stage. This is a temporary criminal court convened for a specific situation. This would be necessary as neither Russia nor Ukraine were signatories of the Rome Statute in 2022. Ukraine has submitted to the jurisdiction of the ICC, which explains the above-mentioned arrest warrants. It also recently ratified the Rome Statute in August 2024, 24 years after signing it.[7] However, there is a jurisdictional gap for the crime of aggression. Due to a political compromise, no action can be taken against nationals of non-party states unless the UN Security Council gives the "green light". Nevertheless, this option is unviable due to Russia's veto right as a permanent member of the Security Council (and an amendment to the treaty is also unrealistic in the near future). However, the actual establishment of a special tribunal is also not yet foreseeable.

In addition to the legal proceedings, the international community condemned the Russian invasion on 2 March 2022. Only a few days after Russia's attack on Ukraine, 141 states voted in favour of an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops. Just under a year later, on 23 February 2023, the UN General Assembly repeated a similar call – again 141 states voted in favour. With

the UN resolution of 12 October 2022, 143 states also declared the annexations of the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia and Kherson invalid and called on Russia once again to withdraw "immediately, completely and unconditionally" from Ukraine, as it was violating Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.[8] Yet, none of this had any significant effect on the current war in Ukraine, which continues unabated.

International Law and 7 October 2023

The situation is similar with regard to the Middle East. Israel's right to exist is coming under increasing threat. Israel has been defending itself on several fronts for more than a year. The Middle East conflict escalated with the terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the rocket attacks by the terrorist militia Hezbollah in Lebanon, which began the following day. Iran has already attacked Israel twice this year with several hundred missiles. Israel has used targeted military operations to kill terrorists in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and Iran, and started a ground offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon at the beginning of October 2024. Many civilians have also died in Gaza and Lebanon. There is a humanitarian disaster in Gaza.

In international law, there is no power above the state.

Here, too, the international courts are dealing with developments within the scope of their competences. Although Israel does not formally recognise the ICJ or the ICC, it is defending itself against the accusations made there. South Africa has filed a lawsuit against Israel at the ICJ, based on the accusation of genocide against the Palestinians. The chief prosecutor of the ICC, in the context of his investigations, has not only applied for arrest warrants against three Hamas terrorists, but also against the then Israeli defence minister and the prime minister. These warrants were granted by the court on 21 November 2024. Israel has also commented on this and subsequently filed an appeal. Israel is thus taking the accusations seriously and respecting the two international courts. The courts will take sufficient time, particularly during the main proceedings, to substantively and comprehensively assess the facts and circumstances. However, in view of the warnings to the population, the humanitarian aid and the fact that Israel is constantly exposed to attacks by Hamas and has to defend itself, the accusation of genocide seems legally dubious; this is despite some highly questionable statements by Israeli ministers (most of whom, however, do not exercise military leadership themselves).

Yet, in view of the many discussions in the Security Council and the intensive ceasefire negotiations between all parties, it is once again clear that this conflict cannot be pacified by international law. So is international law ineffective? Does this mean it is losing its value?

The Law Does Not Make Peace – States Do

It is frustrating and gruelling when resolutions or court decisions are not implemented in an international context. But it is important to understand what international law can and cannot do. According to the UN definition, international law "defines the legal responsibilities of States in their conduct with each other, and their treatment of individuals within State boundaries"[9]. This covers many topics of international interest, such as human rights and world trade. Today, there is a widely interwoven international set of rules that affects many areas. In Germany, we speak of the rules-based international order in this context.

Compared to national public law, there is a fundamental difference in international law. In contrast to civil law, national public law regulates the relationship between the individual and the state. International law, on the other hand, regulates the relationship between states. This aspect is essential, because the great disappointment with international law often stems from the fact that people erroneously assume that it works in the same way as national law. In

international law, however, there is no supranationality, no power above the state. The states stand hierarchically next to each other. They are sovereign. States voluntarily enter into their obligations under international law. As they have an interest in other countries complying with the regulations, they pledge to do the same. If they break their commitment, they undermine mutual trust and, in turn, encourage others to follow their example. The agreement is therefore based on mutual interest and trust.

The crisis of international law is less a crisis of law than of nations.

This does not mean that there are no consequences for breaking the rules. There were indeed international reactions to Russia's war of aggression: the US and other countries, as well as the EU, imposed massive and unprecedented sanctions against Russia. However, all consequences require the international community to take action. There is no automatic enforcement. The party acting in violation of international law must be actively urged to restore compliance with the rules. This only works if it can actually be influenced by the actions of the other states. The implementation of the obligation always depends on the sovereign state itself – unlike in national law, where the state intervenes in the life of the individual as a regulatory power with its monopoly on the use of force.

States feel bound by international law to varying degrees. They often (unfortunately) only follow it as long as it benefits them. The major powers US, Russia, China and India, for example, have

Open disregard for international law: Russia's president Putin celebrating the illegal incorporation of four eastern Ukrainian territories into the Russian Federation in September 2022. Photo: © Mikhail Metzel, TASS, dpa, picture alliance.

Subject of legal disputes: The Hamas terror attack and the Israeli response are currently being investigated by the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. The picture shows a building destroyed by the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip in October 2024. Photo: © Majdi Fathi, NurPhoto, TASS, picture alliance.

not yet ratified the Rome Statute and therefore do not recognise the jurisdiction of the ICC. This additionally undermines an international system that was fragile from the outset. Ernst-Otto Czempiel summarised the relationship between international law and political reality as follows: "International law is and remains a consensus law that depends on being accepted by the participating states. Its contribution towards peace is only as great as the members of the system allow it to be. It is therefore up to them to decide whether and to what extent international law can promote peace."[10]

The Role of the UN Security Council

The crisis of international law is, if you like, less a crisis of law than of nations. It can only function if all states submitting to it understand and apply it equally. Acceptance of the law is the basic prerequisite for its effectiveness. The finding that international law is in crisis is also nothing new.[11] It is in the nature of things that this discourse is repeated when, from the perspective of several states, the prohibition on the use of force is unjustifiably violated and the outbreak of violence is not quickly contained by the international community. The veto right of individual member states in the UN Security Council has proven problematic in this context – and not only in the current war in Ukraine.

The Security Council is more of a political than a legal body.

The Security Council is the central power and sanctions body of the United Nations. It consists of 15 members – five permanent and ten elected for two-year terms. In addition to

France, China, the US and the United Kingdom, Russia is also a permanent member. It is the Security Council's task to adopt and enforce measures if there is an unlawful violation of the prohibition of the use of force, as set out in Chapter VII of the Charter.

In addition to this responsibility, the Security Council is also responsible if a party to a dispute fails to fulfil its obligations arising from a judgement of the ICJ. Article 94 of the UN Charter stipulates that the Security Council may adopt measures to give effect to the judgement. In light of these facts, it comes as no surprise that the multi-layered endeavours under international law with regard to the war in Ukraine have so far been unsuccessful. As a permanent member of the Security Council and in accordance with Article 27(3) of the UN Charter, Russia has a veto right. The five permanent Council members can block any Security Council decision with their vote. The Russian veto thus prevents any resolution that would initiate binding countermeasures against the country.[12] It is therefore these five member states that have to agree each time.[13] And it is therefore the Security Council that, for political reasons, repeatedly fails to enforce court decisions and the law. The Security Council is more of a political than a legal body. Political will is invariably required to enforce international law. And this will is lacking.

Quite rightly, there are repeated calls for reform of the Security Council. It reflects the balance of power after the Second World War. However, this no longer corresponds to today's geopolitical realities. Since 1945, 142 other states have become members of the UN. To ensure that all member states respect the decisions of the Security Council, it must be appropriately legitimised and thus representative. Otherwise, it lacks the necessary authority. The German government rightly points out that in the absence of reform, there is a risk that decision-making processes will be shifted to other forums, even if these do not have the binding effect and legitimacy of the Security Council.[14] Indeed, Russian aggression also poses the "danger of an increasing tendency for political conflicts to be carried out violently, for imperialist goals to be realised by force".[15]

Expectations Need to Be Adapted

However, contrary to what is claimed by some German and international experts with regard to either the Russian aggression in Ukraine or the war in Gaza, this does not mean that international law is "at an end".[16] Nor is international law ineffective. The achievements of international law can by no means be taken for granted. It has taken decades to develop it to its current state. The long-lasting European peace is, among other important factors, also largely due to international law. While there have been around 135 military conflicts between sovereign states in the past 70 years, there were more than 180 in the 70 years before that.[17] Thanks to the United Nations, all member states come together time and again to negotiate.

The terrorist organisations Hamas and Hezbollah openly trample on international law.

Unfortunately, crises, mistakes and failures are often more memorable than achievements and successes. However, these should not be forgotten. Despite the need for reform and their weaknesses, the established systems are peacemakers. In order to continuously strengthen and improve the international structure, patience and adapted expectation management are required.

Although Russia is continuing its war, the impact of the court decisions and votes in the UN General Assembly should not be underestimated. Putin is considered a wanted war criminal in many parts of the world. He is severely restricted in his freedom to travel (even though Mongolia, despite its treaty obligation as a member state of the ICC, did not arrest him during a recent state visit[18]). The clear condemnation of

the aggression, which Russia has labelled a "special operation", by 141 UN member states has had an impact. A vast majority of states firmly opposes the war of aggression. And the judgement of the ICJ retains a high authoritative force and significance for all, even if it has not been implemented or enforced (for the time being)[19].

All of this is (also) thanks to international law. Furthermore, it is international law and its courts that ensure that the Russian war of aggression is dealt with and investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice as effectively as possible. Deterrence and perseverance are needed. Even if Putin is not arrested in the end, he can still be charged. This also has an impact on other states and may deter them from waging a war of aggression of their own.

International law also sets the legal framework in the Middle East conflict. All parties are repeatedly reminded of this. It is the standard that Germany also uses as a basis. While Hamas and Hezbollah, as the terrorist organisations they are, openly trample on international law, it is Israel's claim to abide by it.

The Law Is Just a Tool and It Needs to Be Strengthened More than Ever

Ultimately, international law depends on the will of states to abide by it. The law is merely a tool for peace and justice, but not a guarantee. It is based on consensus and reciprocity[20] between political players. Those who still want a global peace-based order must continue to strengthen international law, trusting in the same interests of other states, and campaign and advocate for its political enforcement at the same time. International cooperation in favour of the rule of law can and must play an important role here.

To stay with a picture by Carolyn Moser: "Ultimately, international law for the international community is like medicine for a sick person: it can help to alleviate pain and combat the disease, but only in conjunction with the patient's self-healing powers."[21] The truth is that the medicine must also be distributed and taken in order to work. And if it does not work (immediately) every time, we would not automatically doubt its basic functionality.

– translated from German –

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In November 2022, United Nations vehicles were set on fire in the city of Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.
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