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Is the West Circling the Wagons? On the strategic situation of Germany and its Allies

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The West – this community of liberal societies, characterised by enlightenment values, the rule of law, the division of powers, democracy, and market economy – is under pressure. It is being challenged by authoritarian states, international terrorism and populist movements while at the same time being weakened by a crisis of confidence. What does that signify for the security policy situation of Germany and its allies, and what measures must be taken in reaction?

The West under Pressure – from the Inside and the Outside

When the German head of government is declared the leader of the free world it is obvious that the West is in a bad way. The liberal societies characterised by enlightenment values, the rule of law, the division of powers, democracy and market economy are under such pressure today as they have not been for at least one generation, since the Soviet Union dissolved and a "unipolar moment" was declared in the United States. Today, these descriptions are the subject of nostalgic reminiscences or bitter punchlines. Anti-liberal players such as Putin's Russia, the China of the Communist Party, the Iran of theocrats or the terrorists of the so-called Islamic State feel emboldened and are trying to expand their sphere of influence. They are undermining the rule-based liberal international order, which is of existential importance to democratic trading nations such as Germany.

The success of these players – in Ukraine, in Syria, in the South China Sea – is possible because the United States is showing signs of weakness. No other Western power has the strength, the will and the political unity to fill the shoes of the United States as a guarantor power of the liberal international order. During President Obama's term, the United States has largely bowed out of this traditional role. Whether the premature withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, restraint in Ukraine, empty threats in Syria, drastic defence budget cuts, the announcement – unaccompanied by military measures – of a rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region: As justified as these and other decisions might have been in the individual case, together they created the space now filled by anti-Western forces.

However, it is not only external forces that put pressure on the liberal West. On the inside, populist simplifiers are gnawing away at social cohesion and the identity of open societies with destructive campaigns and unfulfillable promises. The numerous connections between these internal and external enemies of the lib-

eral order are particularly alarming, such as Russia's financial support for the French Front National or the dissemination of foreign propaganda via (Internet) media.

The central problem of the West consists in having played into the hands of its internal as well as its external enemies. It is difficult for to take on these enemies as the West has underestimated the cost of its politics and at the same time weakened its moral authority. The Iraq War, which breached international law, the flexible interpretation of the law in dealing with terror suspects subsequent to the attacks on 11 September 2001, the destructive effects of capitalism during the financial, economic and debt crisis – these developments make it easy for anti-liberal players to present the West as two-faced, misguided and obsolete.

What makes it even worse is that more and more people in the West believe in this fundamental criticism rather than the validity and enforceability of liberal principles. In any case, the political elites are less and less trusted to be acting in accordance with these values. The West is undergoing a phase of cynicism and self-doubt it has not experienced since the 1970s – after Vietnam, Watergate, left-wing terrorism and the oil crisis. Back then, a conservative reaction occurred under Reagan and Thatcher, which was at its core a classical-liberalist one. The 2016 reaction, which manifested itself in the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump, has so far not shown any liberal, internationalist traits.

At its heart, however, the West continues to be overwhelmingly strong. The reluctance of the United States during Obama's presidency was politically intended, but not forced in any way. As regards the United States' economic output, innovative power, demographic development, energy independence and military capabilities, it does not need to fear any other power. While the situation for Europe is admittedly less rosy, a politically united European Union would continue to be a guarantor of prosperity and stability. As the buzzword of "post-truth politics" illustrates, the upheavals that many Western nations are currently experiencing domestically do not even concern these traditional dimensions of power, prosperity and stability. Western societies are undergoing a crisis of (political) culture, of self-awareness – not primarily one of economic or military security.

The central task of the Western elites therefore consists in gaining back public trust in their capability to exercise control and in their legitimacy. This will not be achieved without a positive agenda for more subsidiarity and stronger integration of socially-engaged citizens. It also includes pointing out how short-sighted and dangerous the anti-liberal alternatives are. Because the Western populists, just like the anti-Western forces on the outside, do not have a better offer to make. For the time being, they do not even require one as their initial aim is to overcome the dominant order, not to shape a new order that is just, or at least has majority appeal. Their order would not be a global one, but made up from different geographic zones of influence in and among which the law of the strongest applies. It is obvious that this cannot be in Germany's interest and that it runs counter to all its political lines of tradition.

Reliability of the United States?

The crisis of the West thus concerns numerous policy fields and consequently also the field of security policy. How can the West, how can Germany protect its interests and values and assert them at an international level? Before 8 November 2016, when many still expected Hillary Clinton to win the election, the reply to this question would have practically written itself. Clinton stressed, even more so than Obama, the regulatory divide between liberal democracies and authoritarian systems. Her foreign policy creed was the protection and further development of the liberal international order. Germany would have followed suit.

With the election of Donald Trump, fundamental doubts have been raised regarding the "long lines" of US foreign and security policy. The dichotomy between liberal democracies on the one hand and authoritarian systems on the other, which has existed since World War II – and whose broadness has helped to hide many an instance of mental laziness, is being challenged. Even if one does not share the concern over the stability of the US democracy, it is uncertain whether Trump's America is still firmly on the side of the liber-

al international order. Trump's rejection of multilateral free trade agreements, his flirt with Putin's Russia and his low regard for US Alliance commitments distinguish him from all US presidents since Harry Truman, who established the liberal international order and today's structures of American security policy. Strategic constraints and the structural circumstances of the presidential office will also influence Trump. His political instincts, however, will hardly change. And the insecurity he has created with statements during his campaign is already producing strange effects – with, for example, the Norwegian government feeling compelled to demand the United States follow a consistent line in their policy towards Russia, or an article in the major newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung suggesting the German government consider its own arsenal of nuclear weapons.

The Key Role of NATO

In view of all this uncertainty it helps to take a sober look at the strategic circumstances of the central security policy institution for Germany and the entire West: NATO. The transatlantic Alliance reacted to the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014 with a strategic adjustment. The defence of the Alliance territory and hence the emphasis on a credible deterrence capability have significantly gained in importance. The Summits in Newport and Warsaw introduced structural and military changes that have already been largely implemented. In this process, Germany has assumed responsibility as lead nation, for example in the establishment of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and of a battalion as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania. With these changes, NATO has sent important signals: to Russia, namely that attempts to occupy NATO territory will have different consequences than in East Ukraine, and to the most exposed Allies, that the Alliance will stand up for their security.

These decisions are only credible as long as the United States' commitment to collective defence continues to exist. Trump, however, speculated during the election campaign about assisting only those Allies who spend the agreed two percent of the GDP on defence and held out the prospect of a “deal” with Putin. On the other hand, every US president since Jimmy Carter has announced his desire to improve relations with Moscow – which due to different geostrategic interests and the political constitution of Russia never actually happened. One must also not forget the wide distribution of power in the political system of the United States – and that the overwhelming majority of Congress is highly critical of Putin's Russia.

Even more importantly: The stability and unity of Europe made possible by NATO is an added strategic, economic and political value even for the American nationalist Trump. It is a key task for the European Allies to make this clear to the new US government. And it is not enough to engage in blackmail by pointing out the historical lesson – that the United States will in the end pay more dearly if it leaves Europe to its own devices than if it continues its commitment. Instead, Europeans need to send positive signals, especially by shouldering a larger part of the financial and military burden of the security on their continent, for example by investing into military-logistic capabilities in support of the new deterrence strategy. Europeans also need to get more enthusiastically and creatively involved in the stabilisation of their security policy environment, especially in North Africa and the Middle East, to contribute to the preservation of the liberal international order. This should be done out of self-interest, but also to relieve the United States.

In this sense, the election of Donald Trump may turn out to be a blessing for Europe after all. Because if the Europeans, for fear of being left alone, finally take up a united and ambitious foreign and security policy, it will ultimately benefit the transatlantic Alliance – and thus the liberal international order as a whole. This applies, however, only if Europe does not misinterpret the current circumstances as a motor for so-called strategic autonomy, but implements its efforts consistently as a part of and in agreement with NATO. Anything else would encourage a division of Europe similar to the one over the 2003 Iraq War.

It is therefore a good thing that EU and NATO want to intensify and further formalise their cooperation. At the same time, current initiatives of the Common Security and Defence Policy must be geared more closely

to generating the urgently required military capabilities that may also be used within NATO – instead of purely structural questions or even the pipe dream of an independent EU military force.

Future Prospects of Germany

Even if NATO and the EU continue to follow their chosen paths, Germany will face tricky security policy tasks as following the Western agenda in the face of external threats has become more difficult. Many allied nations are ruled by governments that cannot readily be considered champions of the open, liberal model of the West. This trend could continue during the forthcoming elections in the Netherlands and France. Conversely, the German migration, economic and financial policy is considered an unreasonable imposition by many partners especially within the EU.

Despite these increasing difficulties, the essential orientation towards common Western ideas and interests remains right. Europeans should not engage in the narcissism of small differences – not among each other and not towards the United States. As different as the concepts of liberal society are in individual governments and nations, as similar they are in comparison with the concepts of authoritarian and extremist players who strategically challenge the West.

This means that “self-dwarfing” and timidity will only deepen the crisis. It is necessary to vigorously, confidently and pragmatically stand up for an open society. This certainly applies domestically, but also regarding foreign policy: towards partners worldwide, in all policy fields, from bilateral commerce to intelligence cooperation. Germany and its allies depend on a stable, law-based and liberal international order. This order, however, does not develop and survive on its own; it needs to be built and protected.

Therefore, the West should not interpret the setbacks of the past ten to twenty years as meaning that maintaining the order of the world is too much to ask, or that every attempt at shaping the international order will make the situation even worse. If nothing else, the metastasising war in Syria has shown that a high price is paid for not becoming involved politically and militarily in geostrategic crises.

What the West therefore needs to do is to remember its principles. The contours of the difficult debates that must take place domestically and with regard to political culture are already visible. They must be accompanied by more commitment and generosity in foreign and security policy – more political and economic support for partners in need, including possible future partners; more investments in national military capabilities; and more creativity and courage regarding conflict prevention and conflict management in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia-Pacific.

The moral and economic resources of the West are strong enough to cope with these challenging times. This cannot be achieved by self-abasement, indifference or a head-in-the-sand attitude, but only by consolidating one's powers of projection and creative will. The West is not circling the wagons; it is a city upon a hill.

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