

↓ RECOMMENDATIONS

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1 **Keep the new warlords in check**

Germany should work with the European Union and the United Kingdom to initiate new alliances enabling states to counter the “new warlordism” we are seeing among major and middle powers. Potential partner countries could be India, Brazil, South Africa, and Canada.

2 **Call out violations of international law by the United States**

By selectively denouncing breaches of international law while, through evasive language, appearing to tolerate violations by allies such as the United States and Israel, Germany risks undermining its credibility as an international actor.

3 **Counter violent territorial shifts**

Germany must firmly oppose any recognition of territorial gains in Ukraine achieved through the use or threat of force. Israeli land seizures in Palestine must likewise be condemned.

4 **Ensure multilateral institutions remain functional**

The German government must work with like-minded states to preserve and strengthen the United Nations’ (UN) capacity to act in the fields of prevention, mediation, and peace, and to enhance the effectiveness of arms control institutions.

5 **Support courts and humanitarian assistance**

Germany must provide strong political and financial support to the International Criminal Court and United Nations humanitarian coordination mechanisms.

6 **Strengthen the UN’s role for world peace**

Rival structures to the UN and short-term initiatives such as Donald Trump’s “Board of Peace”

must be categorically rejected by all EU member states. Within the UN, the General Assembly must be strengthened.

7 **Reject the transactional approach in German development policy**

Interests must not be pitted against values. When development cooperation becomes merely a tool to curb migration, secure raw materials, or make geopolitical deals, it can no longer fulfil its purpose of building and sustaining peace.

8 **Strengthen artificial intelligence and digital sovereignty**

In the field of artificial intelligence, Europe must reduce its dependence on the USA and China. Priority must be given to securing access to critical raw materials and computing resources, as well as to building resilient value chains.

9 **Lay the groundwork for arms control**

Germany must work to establish and maintain the foundations for robust arms control, especially in this era of new arms races. This requires a flexible arms control framework that takes emerging weapons systems and digital capabilities into account.

10 **Assess the domestic policy implications of the “war on terror”**

Twenty-five years after 9/11, a transparent and uncompromising evaluation of the security legislation introduced since then is long overdue. Besides assessing the appropriateness and effectiveness of these measures, it is also important to examine whether, where, and how racism has been perpetuated.

STATEMENT /

The new warlords:

Containing the dynamics of violence /

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The world order is becoming increasingly fragmented. War is back on the international political agenda, and with it a new type of violent actor: the state warlord, who resorts to the threat and use of force to advance power and profit interests. These new warlords—primarily autocracies or states in democratic decline—exploit the weaknesses of existing rules and institutions, further deepening them. They have unleashed forms of military violence that must be stopped if we are to prevent the collapse of the world order and its rules-based framework.

International politics is undergoing a period of profound upheaval. Democracies around the world are increasingly under pressure, with both the number of democratic states and the quality of democracy in global decline. At the same time, the postwar order they helped to establish is disintegrating. Decision-making within the United Nations (UN) is deadlocked or the organization is not involved in ongoing and looming conflicts at all, while UN peacekeeping missions are being scaled back. Development cooperation and humanitarian aid are facing drastic budget cuts. Arms control regimes are increasingly being sidelined, while arms modernization and defense spending continues to rise. Today, the use or threat of military force has once again become an effective instrument of international politics, with both major and middle powers increasingly acting unilaterally and showing that they are prepared to use military force to advance their interests, often with no regard for international law. The result is an escalation of violent conflict. This development is particularly visible in Europe (Russia's war on Ukraine), the Middle East (the war in Gaza and US-Israeli intervention in Iran), and sub-Saharan Africa (Sudan and eastern Congo). But its effects can also be felt in Latin America (US intervention in Venezuela) and in Asia (Myanmar, clashes on the Afghan-Pakistan border, and tensions in the South China Sea). In short: military force has taken center stage in the global order.

The international order established by the world's democracies after the Second World War is collapsing

Amid this ailing world order, a new type of violent actor is emerging on the global political stage: the state warlord. Originally used to describe local, non-state actors engaged in violence in areas of fragile statehood, the term warlord now has to be extended to include state actors, too.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF WARLORDISM

Traditionally, warlords are non-state or quasi-state violent actors who control armed groups in order to generate profits for themselves and their supporters by means of force. Their main objective is not to gain territorial control in the conventional political sense, but to accumulate resources using violence and patronage. Governance structures are shaped around private interests, with (supra)national institutions and processes of legitimization playing no more than a marginal role. This pattern of behavior—where leaders use violence for personal gain and to expand their power and influence—has long been associated with economies of violence in the Global South. Yet, for quite some time now, similar dynamics have also been witnessed among major and middle powers in the Global North.

More and more major and middle powers are behaving like warlords, using war as a means to an end

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Like their non-state counterparts, these new warlords concentrate political power in their own hands, make extensive use of force, and deploy state resources for personal, clientelist, or imperial purposes. They operate in the gray area between state order and its breakdown—and they do not employ these tactics out of self-defense, but as a deliberate strategy. While local warlords form oligopolies and plunder resources in fragile states and regions, the new warlords are far more dangerous, as they command entire armies and have intelligence services and high-tech weapons at their disposal. These are not rebel leaders, but presidents, generals, and monarchs. They do not act in the shadow of the state, but through it. And they are not driven merely by local self-interests, but expansionist, imperial projects.

Examples of this type of warlordism are becoming increasingly widespread, the clearest being among the major powers—or at least those who see themselves as such. Russia's President Putin launched a war of aggression against Ukraine which has just entered its fifth year—his aim being to make his vision of a restored Greater Russian Empire reality. In his inaugural address as president, Donald Trump announced his intention to make America great again, and has since threatened both allies and adversaries with the use of force—frequently also resorting to it—to advance his interests. The United States is once again openly asserting its prerogative to intervene in foreign affairs across the Western Hemisphere, while signaling its interest in securing access to resources.

But middle powers such as Israel, Türkiye, and the Gulf States are showing similar tendencies. These countries are acting less and less like traditional nation-states and more like imperial power brokers, expanding their spheres of influence and selectively instrumentalizing international rules in pursuit of their own interests. The key point here is that this development is not the result of unavoidable systemic constraints but a consequence of political decisions. The new warlords are actively appropriating instruments of violence and using them to pursue political, economic, or territorial interests. They could act differently, but deliberately choose not to. In this world, war is once again becoming a normalized course of action that requires no further legitimization. Donald Trump's statement that he was considering bombing Iran's Kharg Island again "just for fun" was not a slip of the tongue, but a symptom of a political culture where violence is no longer taboo but presented almost playfully as a form of performative self-indulgence.

The new warlords are not the product of systemic pressures or constraints, but of political decisions

These new warlords do not only wage wars—they conduct politics by military means. They use violence to secure political, economic, and legal advantages. In the process, they undermine international organizations and regulatory frameworks—sometimes intentionally, sometimes as collateral damage. This development is not inevitable. It can be politically contained, slowed, and in some cases even rolled back. For now, however, there is little indication of a rapid reversal of this trend. The main focus will therefore have to be on at least slowing the current spiral of escalating violence and limiting its continued progress.

↘ THE NORMALIZATION OF POWER POLITICS

The rise of the new warlords, and the way they operate, is particularly evident in the actions of the United States, Russia, and Israel, as well as in the way Pakistan, Türkiye, Ethiopia, and the Gulf monarchies project power in their respective regions. For example, the three Gulf monarchies are in competition with one other, involving themselves in civil wars in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa—be that in Libya, Gaza, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, or Somalia. In all these conflicts, when a Gulf monarchy supports one side, another backs their opponents. Their actions range from maintaining their own military presence to providing financial and military support to civil war factions, and mediating in peace talks. Whether wars are being waged or peace is being brokered, none of this is guided by normative considerations. Instead, these actions are seen solely as an effective means of advancing geopolitical, strategic, or economic interests. Compliance with international law plays no meaningful role; war is merely a means to an end. These middle powers are thus increasingly acting in ways reminiscent of warlords, a pattern further reinforced by recent US behavior. Yet external efforts to influence the policies of the three Gulf monarchies in the various conflict regions have proven extremely challenging. The European Union (EU), however, could exert greater influence by imposing stricter conditions on EU arms exports to the Gulf states, thereby helping to prevent European-made weapons from reaching countries embroiled in civil war.

The Gulf monarchies use military intervention and peacebuilding as tools to pursue their own interests

↘ DISMANTLING WARLORDISM—SHAPING TRANSITIONS TO PEACE

Warlords derive not only their profit but also their legitimacy from war. To counteract state warlordism, sustainable transitions to peace are therefore needed. For Ukraine this would mean refusing to recognize Russia's territorial gains, instead providing binding security guarantees, technology-based monitoring, and sustainable and effective reconstruction supported by the international community. In Gaza it has become clear just how inadequate a top-down “peace plan” that disregards Palestinian self-determination and offers no political vision is. Without containing and disarming Hamas, while also limiting Israeli state and settler violence, ceasefires will remain fragile, and the militant and hard-line actors on both sides will be the ones that stand to gain. The situation in Syria, in turn, demonstrates that postwar arrangements are prone to failure if militias are merely co-opted without reforming the apparatus of state violence—and if legitimate claims to autonomy are rejected rather than addressed. Peace begins where the warlords' methods and

War-to-peace transitions require security guarantees, monitoring mechanisms, disarmament, targeted sanctions, and reconstruction

unconstrained power politics—whether local, national, or international—lose their appeal. This can be achieved through credible security guarantees, international oversight, early disarmament and demobilization, legally binding sanctions, and reconstruction plans that set clear priorities and prevent both personal enrichment and the emergence of new economies of violence.

THE SECURITY COSTS OF WITHDRAWING FROM DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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At the same time, the withdrawal of major donors from development cooperation has heightened crisis dynamics. Cuts to humanitarian aid are destroying safety nets, exacerbating food crises, and eroding basic services. In fragile societies such as South Sudan, this also increases the risk of organized violence. Development cooperation can serve as a counterweight to the growing arbitrariness of power—but only if its normative core is preserved. Where it is reduced to a tool for curbing migration, securing raw materials, or making geopolitical deals, it can no longer contribute to building and sustaining peace. Where it prioritizes inclusivity, human rights, the “do no harm” principle, and multilateral cooperation, and is supported by a properly funded peace dimension within the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus, however, it can help preserve spaces for collaborative politics. As a major player in international development cooperation, Germany must advocate for stronger coordination of multilateral development policy and facilitate more effective pooling of existing resources.

Development cooperation preserves spaces for collaborative politics

DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGY

New defense technologies are transforming international security at such a pace that political efforts to regulate them can barely keep up—and it is precisely this momentum that strengthens forms of governance that rely on personalized political authority, arbitrariness, and the demonstrative projection of power. Due to their dual-use nature, artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, and modern biotechnology are driving both civilian and military innovation, while also generating new risks. Dual-use technologies shift the balance of power, undermine conventional arms control mechanisms, and place additional pressure on nuclear, chemical, and biological nonproliferation regimes. Tech moguls, autocrats, and extremist groups exploit this technology-generated gray area to weaken state institutions, expand their room for maneuver, and use violence as a way of asserting their personal authority. The declining threshold for opaque or informal projections of power—from cyber operations to the calibrated use of kinetic force designed to send strategic signals—fosters a political culture in which rules are exploited opportunistically (i.e., for self-interest). Escalations are used for performative purposes, with statements designed to create facts on the ground. Over time, institutional safeguards are circumvented. At the same time, technological advances in sensor technology, satellite reconnaissance, and AI-powered data analysis are opening up new possibilities for verification and monitoring. But these innovations can only realize their

New defense technologies are extremely difficult to regulate—and give warlords additional leverage

full potential where political actors are willing to commit to verifiable rules. An international order is currently taking shape in which rapid technological progress is giving today's warlords additional leverage.

↘ **THE UNITED NATIONS ON THE DEFENSIVE**

The UN represents everything the new warlords reject: international law, the prohibition of the use of force, and multilateral cooperation to address global problems. Yet this international organization has long been in crisis. Its main peace and security decision-making body, the Security Council, has been deadlocked for years. In the current conflicts in Iran, Gaza, and Ukraine, Venezuela, Yemen, and Sudan, the UN barely plays a role. Its core peace and security instruments—peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding—are being used less and less frequently and remain chronically underfunded. Moreover, its liberal focus on democracy and human rights is increasingly under fire. The United States, until recently the organization's most important donor, has not only drastically cut its financial support for the UN, but is apparently also planning to establish alternative international frameworks, such as the “Board of Peace” under Donald Trump's leadership. Countering this institutional dismantling requires UN-wide reforms that are extremely difficult to achieve. The most realistic approach is to strengthen the UN General Assembly and build a strategic coalition of middle and small states capable of providing the UN with political and financial stability.

Facing its most serious crisis to date, the UN needs strategic coalitions of middle powers to bring about stability

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↘ **THE LONG SHADOW OF THE WAR ON TERROR**

The wars being waged by the new warlords are often justified as supporting the fight against terrorism. This is particularly evident in the war against the Iranian regime, which, for decades, has provided financial and political support to a variety of jihadist groups within what is commonly referred to as the “Axis of Resistance,” a coalition committed to the destruction of the State of Israel. These patterns of justification for military conflict closely resemble the logic of the war on terror that the United States declared more than 25 years ago following the attacks of 9/11. Not only did this campaign, officially the Global War on Terrorism, have serious international repercussions; its impact continues to be felt within societies to this day. In its wake, many countries—including Germany—introduced extensive counterterrorism and counter-radicalization measures. As a result, the entire Muslim community fell under blanket suspicion of posing a collective security threat. It is time to conduct a thorough evaluation of these measures and examine their intended, and unintended impact. Anti-Muslim racism has spread to the mainstream where it is now as deeply entrenched as antisemitism and other forms of racism. All of these phenomena must be recognized as serious social problems and addressed as a matter of urgency.

The war on terror has fostered a culture of suspicion toward Muslims, and its policies require systematic reevaluation

CONCLUSIONS

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Without decisive countermeasures, it will no longer be possible to prevent the continued erosion of the multilateral order and its regulatory frameworks. The behavior of the new warlords has already given us a glimpse of what will come next: the normalization of military force as a routine political instrument and structural advantages for those actors who are willing and able to use it. Those who lack access to such means—or who choose not to employ them—risk permanently losing their security and autonomy.

This trajectory is not inevitable. But preventing it requires decisive action now. We must begin by clearly identifying and publicly condemning blatant violations of rules, regardless of whether these are committed by allies or adversaries. Only then can a rules-based order be upheld. If breaches of international law are tolerated—as in the German government's response to the US intervention in Venezuela and the US-Israeli strikes on Iran—this undermines the credibility on which its foreign policy rests. Such inconsistency may, whether intentionally or not, contribute to the continued erosion of the international order.

That said, condemnation does not necessarily lead to compliance with the rules. This requires institutions and mechanisms of conflict regulation that are both recognized and utilized by the majority of states. The United Nations is one such institution. While the UN Security Council will no longer be a viable force for peace in the foreseeable future, the UN General Assembly could very well be, provided that those member states committed to upholding the international order are willing to use their resources to strengthen it. This includes putting a stop to cuts to development cooperation. At the same time, development cooperation must also be understood in strategic terms; its added value in this regard lies in strengthening trust in partnerships and the international order. An equally important task, especially in this era of escalating arms races, is to rebuild and sustain the foundations needed for a robust arms control regime. This requires modernizing arms control systems and making arms control mechanisms more flexible and adaptable.

Germany and Europe can play a key role in addressing these challenges—provided that they remain committed to upholding international law and global norms. Reducing dependence on the United States in defense and arms policy will be essential in this context. At the same time, strengthening European autonomy in the field of artificial intelligence is crucial—not only in research and development, but also in its application and in securing access to critical raw materials and computing resources, particularly in relation to China.

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