

# STATEMENT / A Rudderless World /

Since February 24, 2022, Europe has been shaken by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, a conflict whose ramifications and risks of escalation are of global importance. The Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 has taken on similar significance for the Middle East where the threat of a regional conflagration looms. At the same time, the United Nations Security Council is in a state of paralysis. Interest-led unilateralism is replacing institution-oriented multilateralism. In a nutshell: The world is rudderless.

World peace being threatened by war and violence is not a temporary, short-term phenomenon; in the long term, too, the foundations of peace are at risk. When it comes to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many parts of the world are falling severely short of expectations. The international community is losing valuable time which would be better invested in exploring socially just ways of dealing with the impacts of the climate crisis.

The political projects of global governance we saw in the 1990s and 2000s—strengthening and expanding multilateral institutions, promoting democratization, providing external support for peacebuilding—have all faltered or come to a complete standstill in the past 15 years. Groundbreaking ideas that provide a fresh political framework for the new global era are few and far between. The multiple crises of our times have left global policymaking in need of new, pragmatic points of reference. These can be found, first, in international law and multilateral principles and regulations across the various policy areas, which would need to be developed collaboratively. Second, confrontational security policies must be contained through joint risk management and arms control. And third, even in situations where short-term positive outcomes are unlikely, conflict management strategies must be pursued by exploring the possibility of a ceasefire, armistice, or negotiations.

## ↘ **INTERNATIONAL LAW AND REASON OF STATE: THE ISRAEL–HAMAS WAR**

The Hamas terrorist attack on October 7, 2023 shook Israel to the core. This was due not only to the large number of victims it claimed but also to the sheer brutality of the

massacre. With this attack, Hamas dedicated itself to a logic of destruction that evokes old traumas and negates Israel's right to exist.

At the same time, Israel's actions during its ground offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip are very alarming. Israel's warfare went beyond the legitimate exercise of its right of self-defense and, in multiple respects, violated the fundamental principle of proportionality and international humanitarian law. The result was well over 30,000 dead and more than 70,000 wounded, most of whom were Palestinian civilians. In this context, the decisions of the ICJ in The Hague take on especially high normative importance, with the court currently facing the task of ruling on the risk of genocide in Gaza based on a case filed by South Africa against Israel.

Immediately after the October 7 attack, the German government rightly supported Israel in the latter's claim for self-defense. Notably, this position stood in the tradition of former German chancellor Angela Merkel who emphasized in a speech before the Israeli parliament on March 18, 2008 that, when it came to Germany, the security of Israel was non-negotiable. Whether the term "reason of state" used by Merkel in this speech and frequently reiterated in recent months is fitting for this fundamental political principle is questionable. Irrespective of one's position here, reason of state cannot take precedent over international law. The German government's position, particularly in the initial months after October 7, has raised doubts as to whether it is advocating strongly enough—not least in view of the principle of the universality of human rights—for the interests of the Palestinian population in Gaza, who are the victims of extreme destruction, displacement, death, and hunger.

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One of the particularly problematic aspects in this context is weapons deliveries to Israel. Both the international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and the German Kriegswaffenkontrollgesetz (Weapons of War Control Act) prohibit the German government from authorizing arms exports if there is a risk that they will be a threat to peace, security, international humanitarian law, or human rights. And this very risk currently exists in Gaza. The German government must therefore refrain from supplying Israel with such weapons (especially small arms, light weapons, and ammunition), which are intended for use in the war in Gaza. This should not, however, restrict Israel's capacity to defend itself against state threats.

When it comes to long-term conflict management, the two-state solution is brought back on the table as a possible objective. However, the situation in Israel and in the Palestinian territories is not the same as it was in the 1990s, when the Oslo peace process sought such a negotiated solution. Funded by the Israeli government, the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has drastically increased since then. Israel has increasingly institutionalized its occupation, with sections of the current government speaking openly of annexation. The Palestinian population, in contrast, faces considerable restrictions of their rights, resources, and mobility and, in the West Bank, is increasingly exposed to violent attacks from settlers and security forces. Palestinian political institutions are divided, weak, strongly suspected of corruption, and not even seen as legitimate representation by their own population.

No unified position can be expected from other states in the region though certain shifts can currently be observed in relations between Israel and its immediate neighbors. Whether or not this might hold the potential for conflict resolution with the Palestinians remains to be seen, however. Iran and its allies, in contrast, are hostile toward Israel, as seen in Iran's unprecedented direct attack on Israel in the night of April 14, 2024.

In the short term, a two-state solution is virtually impossible to achieve

A two-state solution, while remaining a long-term prospect, is virtually impossible to achieve in the short term. First, more urgent action is needed: a ceasefire, the release of hostages, and the provision of humanitarian aid for the people of Gaza. After the war, Germany and its partners must work toward a transitional phase for the Gaza Strip overseen by the international community, enabling the provision of humanitarian aid, economic recovery, and political prospects. A UN mandate to guarantee security would be conceivable, but, in view of the Security Council stalemate is highly unlikely.

### ↘ **FLASHPOINT IN WEST AFRICA**

Since 2022, violent conflict around the world has been at its highest point in 30 years, with twice the number of victims of war compared to previous years. Although Ukraine and Gaza dominate the headlines, more than half of the world's violent conflicts are waged in sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan, Tigray in Ethiopia, and the Lake Chad region being the primary trouble spots. The security situation in West Africa has recently deteriorated with jihadists fighting against government troops. Military coups in Niger (2023), Gabon (2023), Burkina Faso (2022), Guinea (2021), and Mali (2021) have made the region even more volatile. Sanctions imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the strong criticism of European countries drove Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to leave ECOWAS, in doing so strengthening the legitimacy of the juntas. The putschists also found new international partners, especially in Russia.

The developments in the Sahel region are too important for Europe and Germany to withdraw completely. When the Bundeswehr mission in Mali comes to an end, the German government would be well advised to continue to engage in the region by means of diplomacy and development policy, as well as cooperating with civil society actors. In general, the German government has to define criteria for development cooperation in countries with authoritarian governments.

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### ↘ **WHY THE LOCAL LEVEL MATTERS: PEACE AND THE SDGs**

Wars and global crises also overshadow the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The "midterm review" of the 2030 Agenda in fall 2023 was rather sobering, with as little as 15 percent of the goals that the international community of states had set itself in 2014 progressing as planned. This lack of success hits the fragile countries of sub-Saharan Africa particularly hard. One problem apart from the unfavorable overall conditions is that, when implementing processes of transformation, the relevant actors tend to take a top-down approach.

Countless cases show that bottom-up approaches that address local needs and draw on local knowledge are more effective. For sub-Saharan Africa, it can be seen that progress is possible on the poverty reduction and food sovereignty fronts as well as when it comes to violence prevention and conflict resolution. In other words, a stronger focus on local approaches is needed. That being said, for such local-level measures to be successful over the longer term, they have to be embedded in national security systems and international support structures.

Approaches that draw on local knowledge are frequently more promising when it comes to violence prevention and poverty reduction

## ↘ SOCIALLY JUST WAYS OF COMBATTING THE IMPACTS OF GLOBAL WARMING

Climate change is continuing unabated, reaching alarming levels and hindering the implementation of the SDGs as it does so. 2023 was confirmed to be the warmest calendar year in global temperature data records going back to 1850 and was 1.48 degrees Celsius warmer than the pre-industrial average (→ EU Copernicus 2023). This unprecedented rise in temperature brought extreme weather events in its wake, ranging from forest fires, droughts, and heatwaves to floods, heavy rainfall, and extreme storms. Of all the world's continents, Europe is heating up fastest (→ EEA 2024). Today, Germany is already among the countries with the highest water loss in the world (→ Bundesregierung 2023). If we continue along this same path—even if all the climate protection commitments of all the countries in the world are implemented by 2023—our world is heading toward a temperature increase of just under 3 degrees Celsius by the end of the century (→ UNEP 2023). As of now, limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees is simply not plausible.

Global warming also has countless negative impacts on peace and security. Food and human security, for example, are both at risk if failed harvests and increasing food prices coincide with migration and displacement. The climate crisis is also a social crisis, because it exacerbates existing inequalities, leaving the poor struggling even more to protect themselves from climate change impacts. And even Europe is not yet sufficiently prepared for climate risks (EEA 2024). Alongside a drastic reduction in harmful greenhouse gas emissions, from a peace policy perspective, we urgently need to promote adaptation measures in preparation for what are now the inevitable consequences of global warming.

In many countries, the climate crisis poses a threat to peace and security

## ↘ LIMITING ARMS BUILDUP

The year 2023 saw arms expenditure rise sharply worldwide, not least as a result of the Ukraine war. It has become clear that new technologies will lead to changes in the battlefield, as unmanned weapons systems and artificial intelligence enable new forms of warfare, increasing response capacity and thus also escalation risks. International regulations for the development and use of these technologies are therefore urgently needed, but, for political reasons, currently not very likely. The increased use of cyberattacks has also shown just how important it is to protect IT networks and critical infrastructures.

Along with Russia's threats to use nuclear weapons in the war with Ukraine, these developments have sparked debates on European or even German nuclear deterrent capacity. Both options are unrealistic and counterproductive as they would increase the threat to the very security we seek to achieve. German nuclear armament not only contravenes national laws and international treaties, it would also jeopardize European cohesion and further destabilize the international situation. European nuclear armed forces would fail due to the fact alone that countries would have to give up their national sovereignty for an effective command structure. Far more important than any such spurious debates is the (re)establishment of nuclear credibility. This must not, however, be achieved with new weapons systems and deployment scenarios but rather by providing guarantees of protection within NATO and by taking a common stand in the Alliance, as was the case in October 2022 when NATO stood firm in the face of Putin's nuclear threats.

European or German nuclear armament would increase the threat to the very security we seek to achieve

Germany or Europe renouncing its nuclear option requires the German government to earmark considerable spending for conventional defense—what better an illustration of what has been dubbed the *Zeitenwende* or changing times we live in. In the foreseeable future, therefore, the focus will not be on disarmament but, from a domestic policy perspective, on the consolidation of these higher arms expenditures and, in foreign policy terms, on stabilization, particularly in view of the increasingly confrontational security policy. Arms control can be instrumental here as it adds to military deterrence, contributes to strategic stability, and helps limit costly arms races.

At the same time, other policy areas must not be neglected. Socially just adaptation measures in response to climate change require financial commitment on the part of Germany, as does social cohesion. After all, Germany's capacity for peacekeeping plays an instrumental role, not least against this backdrop of worldwide crises and conflicts.

## ➤ REFUSE TO GIVE UP ON PEACE

The more military rationale dominates the way we think and act, the more difficult it will be for diplomatic approaches to peace to permeate. As we already set out in the last Peace Report on the situation in Ukraine, these approaches are not mutually exclusive but must be cleverly interwoven.

Successful peace talks are rare, and not all forms of negotiation will bring peace to Ukraine and Europe. Four factors may, however, have a favorable impact on the take-up and success of peace talks: the question of timing, the role of third parties as well as the modularization and the design of peace talks and agreements.

Both conflict parties, especially Russia but also Ukraine, are showing little willingness to engage in open and unbiased negotiations. Western allies can increase the prospect of negotiations through various different measures. These include bringing pressure to bear on Russia by upholding sanctions as well as through military support for Ukraine, with a view to eliminating the plausibility of a military victory in Russia's view, too. Only then will Russia agree to enter into peace talks.

From Ukraine's perspective, reliable security guarantees are a prerequisite for negotiations to have any chance of success. Germany's current security agreement, however, is more of a commitment to best endeavors and needs strengthening. Now is the time to put together the form and content of future negotiations; moreover, we must do our utmost to strengthen international support for the peace process, in particular by involving key players such as China or Brazil.

That said, the chance of a comprehensive peace treaty is slim. One possible approach, however, would be a gradual process involving individual agreements with each step subject to scrutiny, thus strengthening the parties' confidence in the process.

A key problem in any negotiations over the Ukraine conflict are Russia's territorial claims. A temporary internationalization in the form of a trusteeship, ideally coordinated by the UN Trusteeship Council, could buy some time to get a long-term peace settlement off the ground. This model, however, is associated with significant organizational and financial challenges, not least because of the size of the territories. It is also clear that territorial options can only be explored within the framework of a future comprehensive negotiation process that gives Ukraine, in its capacity as a sovereign state, an equal seat at the table. Lastly, when it comes to the timing of a trusteeship, it is important to ensure that it does not unintentionally create a scenario that is difficult to undo.

## ↘ **DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE**

It is not only external peace that is under threat, however. In fact, internal peace is also at risk, particularly in democratic societies. In many countries, we are seeing authoritarian, sometimes even extremist parties achieving hitherto unseen successes in the polls and elections. And in Germany, too, a normalization of authoritarian and extremist worldviews can be observed across broad sectors of the population. Alongside the typical, primarily right-wing forms of extremism, increasingly complex ideologies, constellations of actors, and activities are emerging which cannot be clearly assigned to established categories. Multiple crises only serve to advance this development; however, it is also rooted in processes of social disintegration and social media dynamics which exacerbate conflict.

It is vital that we seek dialogue with critics—whether that be in the climate movement or among protesting farmers. A prerequisite for this is the acceptance of basic and human rights as well as adherence to democratic and rule of law standards. Politicians must take social grievances and dissatisfaction within democratic societies seriously and make a visible effort to address the concerns of the weaker groups in society.

At the same time, democratic actors must not enter into any kind of cooperation with extremist and authoritarian groups and must not adopt the reasoning or verbal imagery of any such groups. The German government's Democracy Promotion Act must be passed and implemented as soon as possible in order to create a predictable financing basis for democracy promotion, political education, and the prevention of extremism in the current situation. Moreover, democratic institutions must be strengthened and protected in order

Democratic actors must not cooperate with extremist and authoritarian groups

to safeguard their independence even when parliamentary majorities change. On the other hand, banning certain political parties—this being the most powerful weapon of what is known as “resilient democracy”—must be considered with great reluctance only.

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## CONCLUSIONS

For many parts of the world, peace is still a long way off. Paths to peace are often hard to see, while the risk of existing wars and conflicts escalating remains high. Moreover, collaborative initiatives that tackle pressing global issues are few and far between. The democratic institutions of many countries have been permanently weakened, whereas authoritarian and populist tendencies are on the rise worldwide. We propose three points of reference for this world that has lost its way: first a consistent focus on international law and the international judicial system; second, the containment of rivalry through arms controls and joint risk management; third, groundwork for negotiations and security guarantees, even in situations where the chances of short-term success are slim. In other words: rethinking the core principles of multilateralism. This is especially important if progress is to be made in addressing the impacts of the climate crisis and achieving the SDGs that are instrumental in guaranteeing these vital human needs.

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