STATEMENT / In the Shadow of the Pandemic: Europe's Last Chance /

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic is keeping the world in suspense. It is consuming vast quantities of resources and has led to sweeping political interventions in the life of societies. Especially in fragile regions of the world, there is a danger of socio-economic turmoil and political unrest. A global pandemic requires a global response – in terms of both geography and design. The EU has a particular responsibility here. If the current crisis can be dealt with via cooperative means, this also creates opportunities for the post-corona world. In the shadow of the pandemic, it is also all too easy for other threats to peace to fall off the radar or run out of control. They, too, have to be kept in view and dealt with.

We cannot write an analysis of the state of peace in the world in spring 2020 without mentioning the coronavirus pandemic. The force with which the COVID-19 crisis impacts and suppresses other issues is overwhelming. The virus, which first emerged in China, has spread rapidly across the whole globe. Efforts to hinder its progress have entailed a huge curtailment of civil liberties. Social distancing has become the new form of coexistence. Speculation on falling prices is rampant. National economies are gradually collapsing. This all places a considerable amount of stress on peace – both domestically and internationally.

In Europe, attention during the coronavirus crisis has mostly focused on issues of peace within our societies and on the question of how strong our sense of solidarity actually is. But the pandemic affects other regions of the world just as or even more dramatically – and we need to keep them in mind, too, when we think about threats to peace. Particularly in the poorest countries, there is a danger that the next wave of the pandemic will see health systems collapse and drastic shortages emerge in the supply of food, medicine and clean drinking water, while state institutions could fail, leading to political unrest and an increased risk of everyday violence.

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In the major conflicts of the present time, those who are seeking to gain an advantage are not concerned with the virus. The victims in the crisis regions are focused on the immediate task of surviving – and are completely at the virus's mercy. In Idlib, in Yemen and in South Sudan, there are no tests and no treatment, just infection and death. That is why the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire is the right response.

The protection of civilians in armed conflict, which is in any case more theory than practice, has become even more precarious in the time of coronavirus → **1**. The humanitarian situation of refugees is also deteriorating rapidly. In March and April 2020, the camps on Lesbos were sealed off, cutting off access to aid supplies and projects in a situation where overcrowding was already capable of causing unrest. At the same time, the EU suspended its humanitarian resettlement program. In general, states that could, closed themselves off more than before.

The enormous resources – human, financial, but also cognitive – that societies are mobilizing to manage the coronavirus crisis cast a long shadow in which other problematic situations and threats to peace are increasingly neglected or vanish completely from public perception. This includes climate change → **F**, the state of civil liberties both inside and outside Europe → **2** and the ongoing danger of far-right violence → **5**.

But it is not only awareness of such issues that is changing in the shadow of COVID-19. The level at which political decisions are made and enacted is also shifting towards the nation state – even as far as isolationism. It is deeply ironic that the fight against a virus capable of such rapid global spread is being carried out above all using national political means. Closed borders, unilateralism, competition over PPE, medical equipment, pharmaceuticals and vaccines – the coronavirus crisis has strengthened a tendency that has been evident for some time: instead of seeking multilateral cooperation, states are going it alone.

National unilateralism instead of multilateral cooperation in the fight against COVID-19

Over and above that, governments around the world are placing restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms. This significant growth in executive power cannot continue without limits. Sunset provisions are needed if democracy and civil rights are to avoid taking permanent damage. While a number of countries, including Germany, did discuss the dangers of a state of emergency of this scope at an early stage, several heads of government, such as the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, have used the crisis as an opportunity to continue their attacks on democracy.

The Peace Report 2020 continues to be concerned with peace-related matters that were central before the start of the coronavirus pandemic and which remain so – even if they are now overshadowed by the crisis.

The coronavirus pandemic cannot be an excuse to neglect the pursuit of peace

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These topics should not be neglected: taking further measures to protect the climate, protecting civilians in armed conflicts, appropriate responses to mass protest movements, a cybersecurity strategy that focuses on resilience, tempering great power rivalries by means of multilateral cooperation, and combating online cultures of hatred. For these areas of peace policy, the coronavirus may be a crisis, but it can also be an opportunity. How the pendulum will ultimately swing could not be determined with any reliability by the editorial deadline (30 April 2020).

↘ KEEP CLIMATE ACTION A PRIORITY AND USE IT TO PROMOTE PEACE

Climate change as a stress factor in conflict situations

Climate change remains a major challenge for peace. It undermines the ability of people in many regions to make a living, increasing the risk of conflict and hampering the search for long-term peacebuilding. Yet the demonstrable effects of climate change on violent conflicts so far are limited. Simplified assumptions that climate change inevitably leads to more violence and war are unsustainable.

What is not disputed is that climate change is a stress factor and risk multiplier in existing conflict situations, and that this increases with the level of global warming. This is particularly the case in regions where life is already hard and institutions fragile. The risks to peace of climate change are thus distributed very unequally among the world's regions. Preventive measures that seek to promote peace in the face of climate risks therefore need to distinguish between those who cause climate change and those who suffer as a result of it.

Climate policy needs to be conflict sensitive

Traditional security policy instruments – things like arms and the military – are no use in combating the climate emergency. They are themselves harmful to the environment, and they stand in the way of peaceful conflict resolution. There is a need for policies and instruments that can help to generate a cooperative approach to the climate problem while maintaining a durable peace. We need, above all, to agree on measures that draw together climate and development policy and the pursuit of peace. Efforts in early warning, crisis prevention and analysis of the effects of climate change on peace should be strengthened. Civilian climate policy, consisting of emissions reduction and mitigation efforts, needs to be conflict sensitive in order to avoid unintentional negative consequences.

The coronavirus pandemic is a major challenge for global efforts to protect the climate. While current measures to restrict the spread of the virus have had the side-effect of benefiting the climate in small ways, they are not sustainable. The already perceptible decline in focus on global climate policy and the change of political priorities in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic might even endanger the goals of the Paris Agreement. It is therefore all the more necessary to maintain measures under the current conditions that ameliorate the already foreseeable negative consequences of climate change for peace. Furthermore, alongside social measures, climate change also needs to be an integral part of programs for the rebuilding of affected economies.

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↘ SUSPENDING HUMANITARIANISM IS INHUMAN: PROTECT CIVILIANS

The coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating existing conflicts worldwide, particularly in the Global South. There is a danger that the spread of COVID-19 could lead to the intensification of international conflicts, further weaken fragile states and, above all, lead to a drastic deterioration in the conditions faced by civilians in warzones and by refugees. Wherever large numbers of people are forced to live in confined areas without adequate sanitation, the virus is likely to spread rapidly, the number of victims will rise, and infrastructures that are already stretched thin may collapse completely.

Protect the civilian population in the coronavirus crisis

As things stand, Germany and the other EU states are concerned mostly with themselves. Humanitarian initiatives such as the planned intake of child refugees have been shelved for the time being. Yet conflicts such as the civil war in Syria continue unabated. Following concentrated military attacks on the civilian infrastructure in Idlib in March 2020, refugees flooded into the Syrian-Turkish border region. At the same time, Turkey increased the pressure of its threats to allow refugees into Greece and hence the EU. The situation in the refugee camps, in Syria, Turkey, and the Greek Aegean islands deteriorated visibly. An outbreak of coronavirus in these camps, including the Moria camp on Lesbos, which was planned to hold 3,000 people but was home to 21,000 in early 2020, could be a humanitarian catastrophe.

Urge external powers in the Syria conflict to adopt a ceasefire

Europe should focus on urging the external powers involved in the Syria conflict – Russia, Iran, and Turkey – to conclude a ceasefire that would relieve the situation around Idlib. Given the likelihood of a COVID-19 outbreak in the area it is vital first to ensure the long-term provision of cross-border humanitarian assistance and then to use the threat of coronavirus to seek to bring about a political resolution to the conflict. Similar approaches should be taken with regard to other conflicts, such as in Afghanistan, Somalia, Congo, Yemen, and Mali.

The coronavirus crisis also provides an opportunity to take resolute and brave decisions in the name of humanitarianism within Europe's borders: The provision of large-scale EU assistance to Greece would allow the evacuation of completely overcrowded refugee camps on the Greek islands and the refugees to be brought to safe accommodation on the mainland – with access to healthcare facilities and medical services. At the same time, asylum processing should be rapidly accelerated, and recognized refugees resettled in other EU states. That would not only fulfil the requirements of the Geneva Refugee Convention but would also be in line with Europe's self-professed political values. After all, "suspended" humanitarianism is simply inhuman.

Evacuate the refugee camps in Greece

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↘ PROTEST MOVEMENTS: FROM REPRESSION TO NEW UNREST?

Mass protest movements are a global phenomenon. Anti-regime protests that target entire political systems are of immediate concern to international politics, whether they occur in democracies (e.g. Bolivia, Indonesia) or autocracies (e.g. Algeria, Sudan). The political upheavals caused by these protests can lead to the construction of more free and just societies, but also to political instability or violence. This is particularly the case when governments and the security apparatus react with disproportionate repressive means. During and above all after mass protests, the German government should take a proactive role in mediation and dialogue.

Germany should mediate proactively and encourage dialogue between protest movements and governments

The state-imposed restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic and their social and economic consequences are likely to limit the number and intensity of protest movements in the short-term. Already in March 2020, a number of movements had moved from the streets to the internet or balconies (e.g. the anti-monarchy protests in Spain). It remains to be seen what influence this kind of protest can exercise on politics. As the pandemic drags on, however, we may see mass street protests against the restrictions that have been enacted and their economic and social consequences. The situation is especially dramatic wherever people are forced to coexist in close quarters, such as in refugee camps, slums, and prisons.

A further consequence of the pandemic are curtailments in the fundamental rights of citizens that are being imposed to combat the spread of the virus. While these infringements are assumed to be temporary in stable democracies, they create an opportunity for other governments to systematically strengthen their own hold on power at the expense of democratic rights and individual liberties. Significant curtailments of democratic rights should therefore be expected worldwide, and these could continue for years. People are likely to rise up against such curtailments when governments prove unable to protect them from the serious consequences of the virus. The same is true of the economic disruption that is likely to hit the most vulnerable population groups the hardest. Particularly in fragile states, mass protests and even the collapse of political systems are conceivable. It is concerning that the German government currently has no strategic guidelines for how to react to mass movements and the political turmoil they generate.

↘ BETWEEN CYBERPEACE AND CYBERWAR: ARMS DYNAMICS

Globally, military expenditure rose continually during 2019. In Germany, too, spending on arms rose by twelve percent to 47.9 billion euros. Over the same period, the Federal Government approved record arms exports worth more than eight billion euros – some to countries with very poor human rights records or which are actively involved in wars. At the same time, steps were taken to Europeanize arms production. There is a danger that this may lead to German arms export regulations being circumvented.

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In the coming years, the coronavirus pandemic will create a global economic recession. Whether one consequence of this will be a decline in military expenditure and arms exports – both globally and in Germany specifically – remains to be seen. But given the enormous resources needed for economic, social, and medical crisis management, plans to expand military spending should be subject to review.

Military and arms spending need to be reviewed given the cost of the crisis

Meanwhile, Germany's armed forces are facing a growing volume of requests to assume responsibility for civil activities, such as the protection of crucial infrastructure or in the provision of medical care. If, for instance, the military were to be asked to officially support the police, perhaps in carrying out patrols, it would be important to ensure that the legislative basis for such measures included sunset provisions. The primary task of the military is national defense in the context of systems of collective security. When the military assumes civil tasks, there is a danger of both inefficiency and the confusion of military and non-military functions.

The Peace Report examines the ambivalent effects of the involvement of the military in the civilian sphere thoroughly in the context of cybersecurity. Many states support military cyber forces. The dominant strategies are currently focused on deterrence and forward defense. By contrast, the German government seeks above all to strengthen the resilience of Germany's digital infrastructure and to avoid investing in the development of pre-emptive capacities. Military hackbacks should be restricted to exceptional circumstances and require the approval of the Bundestag. To avoid a digital arms race, the Federal Government should strengthen fundamental norms and appeal for the collective development of rules in the UN framework: This should include a strong moral prohibition on attacks on the public core of the internet and a renunciation of attacks on public infrastructure. In order to counter the logic of forward defense in the cyber sphere, Germany should lobby for the establishment of a transnational attribution committee.

Germany should work for international regulation of the cyber sphere

↘ LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC: THE MULTILATERAL WORLD ORDER

The coronavirus pandemic has intensified existing trends toward national unilateralism and the weakening of international cooperation. The latter, in particular, has been driven by great power rivalries between China, Russia and the USA. These problems have been exacerbated by the rise of right-wing populist parties in many European countries and in the USA. These political forces are generally skeptical towards international cooperation and work to stop the governments of their countries from working proactively on behalf of international institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic shines a light on the crisis of international cooperation

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The coronavirus pandemic shines a bright light on the crisis of international institutions. This can be seen in the unilateralism of national crisis management efforts, but also in the lack of willingness to cooperate effectively with the WHO. Examples of the latter include China's failure to provide information and threats to withdraw funding and accusations on the part of the USA.

The crisis can, however, also be an opportunity: coming together to tackle the coronavirus creates an experience of solidarity and dealing with the economic and social consequences of the pandemic will require international efforts and measures. It is important at this point to make sure that Europe is involved in shaping this response. To enable this, there has to a strategic discourse about unalienable core values as well as a great deal of patience. In the long term, China and Russia also have an interest in a stable international legal order and are similarly reliant on international cooperation in dealing with the challenge of the coronavirus. China's economy profits from a stable free-trade regime and legal clarity. In view of the USA's containment strategy, but also because of the enormous expense of the coronavirus pandemic, China needs stable relations with the EU, which is one of its most important trading partners. And because Russia cannot keep up with China's growth and dynamism, Moscow also favors a stable international order that will protect its interests and rights. The EU can and must use this opportunity in 2020 to transform its visions into new impulses for institutions and cooperation projects that will create opportunities for resilient development and the protection of fundamental values in the post-coronavirus world.

Integrate China and Russia in international cooperation efforts

↘ NO BORDERS WHEN FIGHTING CULTURES OF HATRED

In the case of many challenges, including climate change and the coronavirus pandemic, the transnational element is obvious. The transnational nature of right-wing terrorism and extremism is mentioned less often. Yet digital cultures of hatred also transcend national frontiers. Cooperation between states is necessary to disrupt their growth, eliminating the lawless zones where calls for militancy are propagated.

In spring 2020, the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on the development of right-wing terrorism cannot be predicted with any reliability. Yet at least in Germany, two tendencies can be identified: on the one hand, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution has warned that far-right ideologues could use conspiracy theories to mobilize support and make migrants into scapegoats for allegedly spreading the infection. At the same time, the policies of the "established" parties, which have been relatively prudent so far, offer an opportunity to win back lost trust in the effectiveness of democratic institutions from sections of the population.

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The growth of far-right violence in recent years cannot be understood without considering the targeted use of social media by extreme-right groups. Although the number of terrorist attacks and the number of victims are falling worldwide, they remain high. It is particularly troubling that there has been a sharp rise in attacks by right-wing extremists with large numbers of victims in recent years. Even when such acts are committed by so-called "lone-wolves", they occur in a context of discursive coarsening, delegitimization, and open hostility towards minorities, "elites", "traditional parties" and democratic processes.

The growth of right-wing violence relies upon the targeted use of social media by right-wing extremists

Combating right-wing extremism, far-right terrorism, and the racism that underlies them is a concern for the whole of society. Efforts to promote democracy at local, state, and national level need to work together on this front. The resources provided to schools, local authorities, clubs and civil-society organizations must be expanded so that they can tackle right-wing extremism effectively and provide all the necessary tools to their communities – from information to pastoral care.

CONCLUSION

The coronavirus pandemic is the defining issue of 2020. Nonetheless, other global dangers to peace need to stay on the political agenda. Not only the pandemic itself and its economic, social, and political consequences endanger human security and peace; in its shadow, other dangers to peace are intensifying.

Yet the coronavirus pandemic need not only be regarded as a crisis for the global peace effort. It can also be viewed as an opportunity to revive many efforts to strengthen peace. In early 2020, national unilateralism is the rule: yet already and with good reason, calls for concerted European and global responses are growing louder. These include, for instance, cooperation on the production and distribution of protective equipment, in medical testing and in managing the economic and social consequences of the pandemic.

COVID-19 will affect every country, albeit with varying levels of severity. International cooperation is necessary to limit disruption, stimulate the global economy, and ameliorate the political consequences. This is not a hopeless cause, as the experience of global crisis generates the experience of global solidarity, which can help to produce cooperation. In recent years, Europe has faced the threat of being crushed between great-power rivalries. But the current crisis could be Europe's hour to shine. After the retreat to the national level in spring 2020, now is the time for European solidarity. This will certainly need to include

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massive economic support for the EU states that are threatened by insolvency as a result of the coronavirus crisis. The German government should therefore support the efforts of the European Commission in this regard.

At the very latest, however, when the effects of the coronavirus pandemic in poor and vulnerable regions of the world become evident, it will be clear whether Europe is capable of global solidarity and a global vision. In this regard, it is essential that European development budgets are not reduced, but rather expanded and directed to inhibit the collapse of medical, social, economic, and political infrastructures. The resilience of crisis regions will be a particular priority. Increasing it in the medium- and long-term will rely especially on the systematic implementation and expansion of efforts to protect the climate. And beyond this, investment in just and sustainable societies along all the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is necessary to ensure a higher degree of preparedness for future crises. Finally, with regard to the violent conflicts that are currently ongoing, there is an acute need for mediation initiatives that can provide at least "breathing space" for humanitarian purposes.

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