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All active on the global diplomatic stage: President Xi Jinping with US President Barack Obama on Sept. 25, 2015.

PRC: Precarious Republic of China?

Beijing confronts an increasingly complex international risk map while enduring the most challenging period of its domestic economic transformation in decades

By Sebastian Heilmann and Mikko Huotari

There has never been a period in which China's diplomats were more active on the global diplomatic stage than they were over the last two years. In 2014-2015 President Xi Jinping traveled the globe more than almost any of his international peers. Since Xi came to power, Chinese leadership has substantially stepped up its foreign policy ambitions, heavily expanding the scope of its activities in the region and its reach on the global stage. By altering long-standing traditions of relative restraint and key priorities of its foreign policy, Beijing is engineering a new course in global affairs.

The list of recent policy successes is long and the sheer weight of China's growing economic, diplomatic and military capabilities will continue to deepen its global footprint. Yet in addition to the strong counterforces of international competition and rising security tensions, China's expanding role faces fundamental challenges that are deeply rooted in its domestic development path. China is transforming into a precarious global power as it confronts an increasingly complex international risk map while enduring the most challenging period of its domestic economic transformation in decades. Crucially, the way in which the PRC leadership translates and exports domestic policy approaches to the international realm will prove the ultimate test of its aspirations to global leadership.

The scale and potential impact of China's foreign policy re-orientation became visible to most observers when China unveiled its new geo-economic masterplan over the course of 2013 and 2014. The Silk Road initiative is Xi's pet project intended to redirect China's diplomatic and commercial energy to new economic, trade and transport corridors in Southeast Asia and Eurasia, stretching out to the Middle East, Africa and Europe. The initiative promises USD hundreds of billions of investment for Beijing's infrastructure foreign policy and already impacts strongly on the region's political and security landscape.

In the last two years, Beijing has become a key hub for global and regional diplomacy, using its home advantage to set the agenda for major international summits including Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), a refurbished regional security forum, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA), and the G20 in 2016. At the same time, China-sponsored forums with Southeast Asian, Eastern European, African and Latin American leaders have become major annual gatherings, usually providing the grounds for new Chinese investment projects.

China's diplomats have also initiated a debate about reinvigorating the UN system, still a core element of Beijing's vision of future global order. It is, of course, no coincidence that Chinese officials have recently taken leadership positions at key international institutions that Beijing considers important for the PRC's global expansion, including the World Bank, International Aviation Organisation (IAO), Standardisation Organisation (ISO) and Telecommunications Union (ITU). New initiatives such as the World Internet Conference – held for the first time in 2015 in Wuzhen, China – are evidence of the PRC's aim to become a leading power in global cyberpolitics.

At the same time, China's financial and monetary advances are challenging key building blocks of the Western-centered international order and are already leading to an overhaul of international financial institutions and global business practices. With skillful diplomatic maneuvering, China's diplomats have won the support of 57 countries for Beijing's development finance push to finally establish the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in early 2016 in Beijing. Two months prior to this, the IMF accepted the Chinese currency into the elite group of reserve currencies that make up the basket of Special Drawing Rights, signaling a crucial turning point in a long march towards the restructuring of the global monetary order.

As a result of expanding commercial interests and strategic considerations, Chinese foreign policy is also more frequently adopting interventionist approaches. It is increasingly mobilizing forces to protect its citizens and interests abroad while trying to position itself as a mediator in international crises ranging from Ukraine to Afghanistan, Syria and the Middle East more broadly. A series of changes in defense policy, together with new anti-terror and security laws, have prepared the policy framework and legal grounds for a more pronounced security posture beyond China's borders. The modernization of the Chinese military is progressing rapidly, while forces are undergoing extensive restructuring to embrace an increasingly global mission.

Underpinning all of these trends are pronounced shifts in the regional sphere and the global balance-of-power matrix. At the core of the leaders' new foreign policy outlook is a regional policy with China firmly set to become the dominant economic and military power in Asia. Intimately linked to this priority, Beijing is increasingly able to play the "big boy's game" with

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Doing the possible

In today's woebegone state of the world, de-escalatory diplomacy and compartmentalized cooperation are the order of the day | By Theo Sommer

Leonardo DiCaprio's frontiersman Hugh Glass is not the only revenant in 2016. Geopolitics and realpolitik are back; spheres of interest and influence are once more contested by the great powers; nationalism is again rearing its ugly head; globalization seems to be backpedaling; concepts like deterrence and containment are making a comeback; thoughts of war, even nuclear war, weigh anew on the minds of global leaders.

To describe the lamentable state of the present-day world one can hardly do better than to quote William Butler Yeats' 1919 poem "The Second Coming":

"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."

These lines were written in the wake of World War I, yet there is no better description of today's woebegone state of the world. Even the title – "The Second Coming" – fits our era of revenants.

Crises have become the new normal. "We live in a time of extraordinary change," US President Barack Obama declared in his last State of the Union address. "We are living in a world that in many ways is falling apart," said World Economic Forum founder Klaus Schwab last month in Davos. Global business leaders are worried that nations are drifting apart rather than growing together.

Wolfgang Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security Conference, deems our global security situation "the most dangerous since the end of the Cold War." Former US Secretary of Defense William Perry reasons that the danger of a nuclear confrontation is higher today than at any time since the termination of the East-West conflict.

The Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists finds the state of the world "so threatening that the minute hand of the Doomsday Clock must remain at three minutes to midnight, the closest it has been to catastrophe since the early days of above-ground hydrogen bomb testing."

Two facts compound the problems emanating from this portentous development. First: All major powers and power groupings are in a state of transition. Second: The time is out of joint, but there is no one to single-handedly set it right.

The political system of the US is polarized and paralyzed to the point of dysfunctionality. Its politicians have lost the ability to get things done constructively through rational dialogue and pragmatic compromise. The question of who will stand on the steps of the US Capitol to deliver his or her inaugural address on Jan. 20, 2016, agitates both friend

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IMAGO/XINHUA

Hail to the Chief! Participants at the Conference of Training Officers of the Korean People's Army in Pyongyang cheer on their leader Kim Jong Un.

No end to the MADness

A North Korea with nuclear weapons capabilities is a global security threat

By Chung Min Lee

As the world was welcoming in the New Year, North Korea's Kim Jong-un extended his greetings with a fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6, 2016. Although Pyongyang claimed it had successfully detonated a hydrogen bomb, a 5.1 magnitude test led outside experts to believe it was only a boosted fission weapon. The more important point, however, is that despite a succession of sanctions imposed on North Korea since it conducted its first nuclear test in 2006 (followed by its second and third tests in 2009 and 2013), Pyongyang is well on its way of becoming a de facto nuclear weapon state.

Notwithstanding diplomatic and military steps taken by South Korea and the US in the immediate aftermath of the test – such as a rapid flyover by a B-52 bomber – the undeniable truth is that the critical stakeholders in ensuring a denuclearized North Korea – South Korea, the US, China and Japan – have all failed to stop Kim Jong-un through a combination of contending political interests, lack of leadership and political will, deep ideological divisions and inconsistent policy priorities.

In sharp contrast to the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) resulting in Iran's decision to desist from pursuing a nuclear weapons program in return for the lifting of critical sanctions, North Korea in all probability already has the ability to miniaturize nuclear warheads. Moreover, it is accelerating its efforts to acquire submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capabilities on top of its robust missile arsenal.

The North Korean nuclear crisis erupted in earnest in early 1993 when Pyongyang announced that it was withdrawing from the NPT (Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty). Ever since, a cottage industry scrutinizing the purposes, programs, policies and pathways of North Korea's nuclear policy has taken shape. But even several hundred academic articles, thousands of newspaper reports and dozens of books have failed to elucidate the facts. Very little is actually known about the inner workings of the North Korean nuclear program. However, after four nuclear tests and two dynastic successions – from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il in 1994 and Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un in 2011 – three major strategic lessons can be gleaned from the course of events, with ramifications not only for South Korean security and the alliance between the US and the Republic of Korea (ROK), but also for strategic stability in Northeast Asia, with repercussions for the People's Republic of China and with respect to NATO's strategic calculus.

First, North Korea's nuclear weapons have helped to perpetuate a totalitarian regime, the world's only communist dynasty. Brutal dictatorships have been around throughout human history, but North Korea is the only totalitarian state to have wreaked unimaginable fear and misery on its people since its inception, in 1948. As noted in the landmark 2014 UN Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "crimes against humanity have been committed in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, pursuant to policies established at the highest level of the State." And further, "these crimes against humanity entail extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds, the forcible transfer of populations, the enforced disappearance of persons and the inhumane act of knowingly causing prolonged starvation." In short, the world's most dangerous weapon is in the hands of the world's worst and most dangerous regime. North Korea, with its vast arsenal that includes weapons of mass destruction, must be perceived a critical global security threat in 2016.

Second, although all members of the Six Party Talks bear responsibility for failing to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons, China's ongoing support for Pyongyang has profoundly weakened international sanctions. Despite Beijing's disapproval of North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, it continues to coddle and protect the regime. While the net value of North Korea as a buffer state against South Korea, Japan and the US has waned over the years given China's astounding economic growth and its increasing integration into the international community, North Korea continues to serve a useful function. It enables China to constrain South Korean, Japanese and American strategic moves in Northeast Asia. A belligerent and unpredictable North Korea coincides with China's increasingly nationalistic and aggressive foreign and defence policies. As long as North Korea continues to remain within China's strategic orbit, there is little need for Beijing to cut its umbilical cord with North Korea.

Third, deterrence of North Korea remains in place with South Korea's highly capable armed forces – comprising 670,000 soldiers – and the critical presence of 28,000 US forces. However, the threat scenario on the Korean Peninsula has been irrevocably changed by North Korea's nuclear arms. The US has stressed repeatedly that if North Korea threatens to use nuclear weapons, or actually uses them, it will retaliate with all possible means, including nuclear weapons. While debate on the efficacy of extended US deterrence continues in the face of a nuclearized North Korea, America's nuclear umbrella remains firmly in place.

The more relevant and more urgent question is which steps South Korea, the US and Japan can take to counter North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal. According to the Arms Control Association and other credible non-governmental sources, North Korea may have enough fissile material for 10 to 16 weapons. The US-Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced Studies predicts that North Korea's nuclear arsenal is likely to grow from its current level of 10 weapons to 20 weapons by 2020, while other projections envisage an increase from 16 weapons to 50, or a worst-case scenario of 100 weapons by 2020. While North Korea has not yet acquired SLBM capabilities, it most likely has miniaturized nuclear warheads in its arsenal. Combined with its array of ballistic missiles, tracking, targeting and destroying such systems in real time poses enormous difficulties for the US and South Korea. Although the 1.2 million strong Korean People's Army has been degraded over the years due to a lack of oil and supplies as well as very out-dated weapons systems, North Korea has opted to accelerate the procurement of asymmetrical capabilities such as nuclear, biological and chemical weapons as well as resources for cyberwarfare.

In summary, a North Korea with increasing nuclear weapons capabilities must be seen as a critical regional as well as global security threat. Developments on the Korean Peninsula have strategic consequences for NATO. Any major disruptions would not only have economic and commercial repercussions throughout East Asia, but could also embolden Russia to exploit whatever windows a Korean crisis may open. Given that the peninsula lies at the eastern tip of the vast Eurasian landmass while NATO is situated at its western tip, there is reason enough to triangulate strategic policies in order to enhance security and deterrence at the two ends of Eurasia, both of which continue to be safeguarded by critical alliances with the US. ■

Chung Min Lee is Professor of International Relations at the Graduate School of International Studies of Yonsei University Seoul, Korea.

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PRC: Precarious Republic of China?

the US, obtaining significant and favorable agreements in areas such as cyber and climate cooperation.

Simultaneously, China is continuing to push through its vision of a regional economic and security order that runs counter to core US interests. Indeed, despite US countermeasures and international concerns, it is striking how rapidly and unabashedly Beijing has been moving forward in the South China Sea, including the pursuit of land reclamation activities on an unprecedented scale.

In relations with Russia, despite lingering distrust China has consolidated an increasingly asymmetric partnership bolstered by energy and investment relations, arms sales and cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS frameworks. Meanwhile, the tone and content of China-EU relations is increasingly set by Beijing's initiatives. Beyond the growing lure of Chinese investment in EU member states and financing promises for key EU projects, Chinese diplomacy has been dividing up the continent in ways that fit its own diplomatic preferences, such as the 16+1 framework.

The pace and rhetoric of the new foreign policy activism under Xi Jinping are impressive. Yet China's newly emerging international reach is precarious for several reasons:

First, the domestic capacity for sustainable crisis-resistant regional or even global leadership is only just in the making, a fact well recognized by China's leadership. The current overcentralization of power in the Chinese system will prove a double-edged sword, facilitating necessary reforms but in itself a substantial risk to resilient policy-making.

Second, Beijing's renewed strategic focus on its neighboring areas has met with significant opposition, with competitive dynamics in Asia spreading from the considerable military and cyber build-ups to infrastructure development. Questions of strategic positioning vis-à-vis the PRC have become major domestic conflict lines in virtually all Asian countries. Xi's new grand-scheme regional policy increasingly clashes with the economic presence of other major regional players such as Japan, Russia and India, whose tolerance, if not support, China needs to realize its vision of an integrated Asia on Chinese terms.

Third, despite superficial calm and Beijing's symbolic summitry, the skepticism of regional leaders regarding the prospects of stability is increasing. A region characterized by all-out hedging does not provide fertile ground for Chinese leadership. Meanwhile, recent steps by the US to achieve its long-anticipated "pivot to Asia," realigning allies and shaping new economic partnerships with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), have been relatively successful. In contrast, Chinese attempts to enmesh the US in a "new type of great power relations" are being rebuffed by the US administration.

Fourth, fractures in its domestic economic engine challenge China's foreign policy outlook and tie the resources of its leaders to Beijing. In the long run, the painful economic transformation might well reinforce China's gravitational pull, but it calls into question the sustainability of China's ambitious outreach. A foreign policy built on financing and investment promises will prove extremely vulnerable to likely turbulence in China's debt-ridden financial system.

China's economic transition has already become a disruptive international factor. A looming trade war and depression trends in global energy and commodity markets are the result of a precipitous industrial slow-down and overcapacities in China. Global uncertainties due to non-transparent and questionable policy decisions only magnify the negative effects of China's broad slowdown. By deepening financial integration and relaxing exchange-rate politics, China is emerging as a source of dizzying volatility. In contrast to its stabilizing effect during the Asian and global financial crises over the last 15 years, today's Chinese domestic decision-making is a potential hazard to regional and global financial stability.

Finally, an often-overlooked key factor determining China's future role is how successful it will be in translating its policy approaches to the world. Key to this translation is communication. However, broadcasting to the outside world in the same propagandistic way as the leadership communicates to its domestic audience will not be successful. Its current "grand narrative" approach and public diplomacy overdrive is simply hard to swallow for most pragmatic policy makers in other countries.

In terms of potentially successful policy export, the best example is China's focus on infrastructure financing for development. Yet the danger here is obvious: striking the wrong balance between policy- and profit-orientation, China might repeat mistakes that have contributed to its current economic worries at home. The environmental, social and financial sustainability of core foreign policy projects are highly questionable. Even less promising is China's new high-profile campaign embedded in the Belt and Road Initiative for "international capacity cooperation," which aims to reduce China's overcapacities through joint projects with developing economies across the globe.

From a European perspective China currently still has the benefit of the doubt while it experiments with different frameworks and approaches to implementing its new foreign policy. Beijing's leaders are in the process of learning geo-economics on a global scale with self-reinforcing effects. In addition to its existing weaknesses, new vulnerabilities incurred alongside its global expansion will be key determinants of China's growing ambitions. ■

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China is catching up, but the boom is slowing down: luxury boutique in Beijing.

In a time of secular stagnation

Re-balancing in the global economy undermines international stability

By Robin Niblett

The last twenty years have witnessed a remarkable re-balancing in the global economy and a commensurate shift in international economic and political power. Fears that these structural changes could lead to major interstate conflicts were prevalent at the last two Munich Security Conferences in 2014 and 2015, at the height of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and as China and Japan engaged in a stand-off over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. A formal outbreak of conflict was averted in both cases, even if violence persists in Ukraine and intra-state violence has proliferated across the Middle East and North Africa.

While steady global growth over the past 20 years drove the shifts in the relative balance of international political power, it also limited their disruptive effects. In 2016, however, the world has embarked upon a new phase in its economic transition. The global economy appears to have entered what some have described as a secular stagnation. Now the world could face a security downturn as well as an economic one.

Over the past six months, Chinese leaders have struggled to manage the transition to what they have termed the "new normal." Wild gyrations in the Chinese stock market may affect only a sliver of the Chinese economy, yet point to the difficulties the Chinese leadership faces in sustaining growth and employment as the export and infrastructure investment of the past decades slows, the construction booms tapers off and indebted local governments struggle to cope with dwindling sources of revenue.

Ongoing military modernization, physical assertion of Chinese claims to sovereignty over islands and reefs in the South China Sea, and the remarkable recent centralization of political power in the hands of President Xi Jinping may help China's leadership confront as well as divert public attention from its economic turbulence. But those same developments appear to carry greater risks at a time of economic slowdown in China than when the leadership and people could expect uninterrupted growth.

In Russia, the dramatic collapse in oil prices – caused in part by the Chinese economic slowdown – poses its own risks. With the state budget based on an oil price close to $50 per barrel, President Vladimir Putin faces a double challenge. Having presided over lackluster economic growth prior to the Ukraine crisis, he must now assess whether he can continue to afford military engagements in Syria and Ukraine, which for the Russian people have exemplified their country's return to greatness on the world stage.

Putin must also divvy up a shrinking financial pie among his circle of close political supporters. One solution in the new economic environment would be to extricate his forces from these external commitments. But it is just as likely, if not more so, that with his back to the wall President Putin could double down on his military gambles and behave even more aggressively on the international stage.

> "In Russia, the dramatic collapse in oil prices poses its own risks."

Even last year's nuclear agreement between Iran and the permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, is having destabilizing effects in the current economic environment, at least in the short term. Saudi Arabia's profound dismay over the deal has intensified as the fall in oil prices forces King Salman to cut subsidies and social payments that have traditionally helped sustain public support for the government. As Iran seeks to reclaim its share of the global oil market and tensions with Saudi Arabia grow, finding a route to peace in Syria and Yemen may prove even more difficult in 2016 than in 2015.

The US and Europe, which still face their own economic challenges, are not well-positioned to manage the risks that the decelerating global economy generates. EU governments are in a desperate race to establish processes, structures and laws to cope with the unprecedented influx of refugees from the Middle East and North and East Africa. They are attempting to do so, however, at a time when levels of trust between the East and West, as well as between the northern and southern EU member states, have severely eroded as a result of both the political battles waged to stabilize the eurozone and differing approaches to migration. German leadership, which had been grudgingly welcomed in 2014, now elicits greater ambivalence in the wake of Chancellor Angela Merkel's generous yet unilateral decision to welcome refugees and Germany's hard-nosed desire to concentrate the delivery of Russian gas to Europe via the Baltic Sea.

Should the 2015 drop in commodity prices destabilize African governments that had hoped to use the resource boom to drive employment and growth, a much-feared expansion of sub-Saharan African migration to Europe could start to materialize this year, placing even greater stress on the EU's internal decision-making and leaving even less time to confront the continuing chaos in Syria and Libya.

Although the EU is still a relative pole of stability in an uncertain world (hence its status as the top destination for refugees and migrants from its neighborhood), its fragile recovery could easily be knocked off the rails if the slowdown in emerging economies were to gouge the profit margins of leading European exporters of industrial equipment, infrastructure goods and services, and high-end consumer products, from cars to luxury apparel. Another major terrorist attack or a disorderly collapse of the EU's Schengen area would also have economic knock-on effects that could exacerbate the EU's internal political acrimony.

And looming over the EU is the upcoming UK referendum on whether or not to remain a member of the EU. A majority vote in favor of a "Brexit" would have a severe impact on EU cohesion at a time of strengthening populist parties across Europe, a metastasizing Islamic State and a still unpredictable Russia.

The US is thus embarking on its presidential election year with international security at the top of the agenda and its main ally, Europe, on the back burner. Worryingly, the global economic slowdown is likely to heighten many Americans' deep frustrations that they are not benefiting from the international economic order the US helped build.

Further declines or devaluations of trading nations' currencies could heighten that sense of frustration, whether with allies like Japan or competitors like China. Whatever the critiques by those inside and outside the US about President Obama's recalcitrant approach to foreign policy, US public opinion is unlikely to give its next president much more room to manoeuver.

The shift from west to east in the global economy's center of gravity, which began twenty-five years ago, reflected a natural re-balancing of the international economy to a more healthy convergence between the size of a country's population and its overall GDP. Whatever worries existed that this re-balancing would lead to dangerous competition between its winners and losers have been overridden by the dominant sense that globalization has offered absolute gains to the vast majority participating in it. In this context, regional and international initiatives that would further enlarge the benefits of deeper economic integration, from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to the planned Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), remain on track.

Today, however, China's difficult and unpredictable transition from a developing to a middle-income economy – mirrored in a number of other countries finding the struggle even harder, e.g. Turkey, Brazil and South Africa – could lead to more of a zero-sum environment in which borders harden and domestic regulations become more discriminatory to outsiders. Policy makers would do well to remember that when international economic dislocation coincides with a major geo-political transition, as happened in the 1930s, they face a most dangerous moment in international relations. ■

Robin Niblett has been director of Chatham House, the British foreign affairs think tank, since 2007.

The age of ambition

Japan is upgrading its defense capabilities in response to Chinese intimidation | By Masataka Suzuki

It is an amusing contrast to see a large group of Chinese tourists strolling along Ginza Street in Tokyo on a shopping spree while 2,000 kilometers to the southwest hundreds of disguised Chinese government and fishing boats cross into Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands on a daily basis.

In 1895 Japan used the principle of ownerless territory to incorporate the archipelago into the city of Ishigaki in Okinawa Prefecture. The government had followed all the proper procedures to ascertain that there had been neither evidence of valid control of the islands by any other state nor any objections raised against Japan's sovereignty. The San Francisco Peace Treaty signed 56 years later in 1951 between Japan and 47 allied powers placed Okinawa under the administration of the US while recognizing Japan's sovereignty. History documents that the islands have remained under the effective control of Japan since 1895.

In 1972 China drastically shifted its security policy to restore diplomatic ties with the US and affirmed the US-Japan Security Treaty. At the time, China entered into a rapprochement agreement with Japan, followed by the "Japan-China Treaty of Peace and Friendship" signed in 1978. It is believed that Beijing feared that a serious Sino-Soviet confrontation could escalate to nuclear war. It was a matter of life or death for China to realign itself in the diplomatic arena; as a result, Japan was targeted as a pseudo-ally. Senkaku was not discussed.

The islands had been owned by a Japanese individual before the government purchased the archipelago in September 2012, instigating extensive anti-Japan riots throughout China. The Japanese embassy was assaulted and Japanese companies in China were stormed, looted or set on fire by frenzied mobs. Since the nationalization of Senkaku Beijing has begun using government vessels to trespass into Japan's territorial waters surrounding the islands.

PICTURE ALLIANCE/DPA/KYODO/MAXPPP

More than a rock, more than an island: The Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.

Tokyo is determined not to ignore Beijing's arrogant attempt to change the status quo through force or coercion in the area. I have recently had an opportunity to inspect Japan's Coast Guard Headquarters in Ishigaki and was encouraged to see how professionally they perform their difficult tasks calmly and serenely amid escalating dangers. The chief of the headquarters explained that his troops represent Japan and the Japanese people, who respect law and justice and cannot afford to bend it.

China, on the other hand, has unilaterally imposed an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that includes Senkaku, stating that it would not preclude using military force against Japan's "invasion," depending on the circumstances.

Over three decades I was involved in formulating Japan's Medium-Term Defense Programs for ground, maritime and air forces, establishing national defense budgets and organizing training and career development for members of the Japan Defense Agency (now called the Ministry of Defense). During the Cold War Japan had the difficult task of establishing and maintaining highly effective defense capabilities under tight budgetary constraints to guarantee peace, security and independence. The US-Japan Security Treaty was the smartest option for the country. The key consideration has been, and still is, to maintain the most advanced air defense capabilities, focus on anti-submarine operational capabilities and strengthen preventive capabilities in blocking vessels and submarines from passing through the three straits around the Sea of Japan.

Based on my experience at both strategic and ground levels, I remain convinced that Japan's military capabilities in the East China Sea and its vicinity are sufficient to cope with most possible contingencies, and that Beijing would face great difficulties were it to extend its operations from the East China Sea into the Pacific.

"One Belt, One Road" is a slogan coined by Xi Jinping, in reference to the ancient Silk Road, to promote his ambition for China to control politically, economically, financially and martially a mass of land encompassing the whole of Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern and Central Europe. The slogan also underscores his cherished desire to rule the China Seas and the Indian Ocean. The South China Sea is a vital part of President Xi's strategic and geopolitical scheme – a gateway to ruling half the seven seas.

China's top priority has been to reclaim or build artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago and to construct ports and airfields for military use. China has also announced its formation of missile troops while building a second aircraft carrier. The next goal is to set an ADIZ over the South China Sea and permanently deploy military aircraft in the zone. Washington immediately countered with a Freedom of Navigation Operation using war vessels and a fleet of aircraft.

China's recent movements have dramatically changed the security environment in Asia. I would propose that Japan respond with the following measures: add one more escort flotilla; expand its fleet of advanced patrol planes; and upgrade its island defense capabilities, supplementing the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the US currently deploys in Japan with another forward carrier with a home port somewhere between Australia and West Japan.

In 2015 Japan revamped its security legislation. For the first time since the war it will now be able to "use force" when a foreign country with close ties to Japan suffers an armed attack, which in turn threatens Japan's survival. This is more-or-less equivalent to the internationally recognized principle of collective self-defense. This legislative reform will also enable Japan to contribute more meaningfully to UN Peacekeeping operations under its newly defined rules of engagement. It will undoubtedly lead to an enhanced role for Japan in securing peace and deterring conflicts within the Asia-Pacific.

Japan is entering an era in which it will work harder for world peace and respond accordingly to its upcoming challenges. ■

Masataka Suzuki is a former State Secretary for Defense for Japan.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Munich Security Conference on Feb. 13, 2016. MSC/KLEINSCHMIDT

Crisis, conflict, dialogue

German foreign policy in a tumultuous world: punching our weight

By Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier

More than any other event in recent history, the current refugee crisis has illustrated that the world has walked through our front door – mostly without knocking first. The effect of a civil war 3,000 kilometers away is on display in German schools, gyms and on the streets. And it sheds a clear light on our responsibilities for Europe and abroad.

Two years ago at the Munich Security Conference, we discussed how shouldering international responsibility starts at home. This insight has become a reality to an extent I would not have imagined then. In 2015, Germany received over one million refugees fleeing war and violence in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts. We have lived up to our responsibility, offering protection to hundreds of thousands of refugees. And that is something we can be proud of.

At the same time, it is obvious that we will have to find ways to reduce the number of refugees coming to Germany and Europe, as the current trajectory is clearly unsustainable. But just sealing off our borders will not help, nor will defining an upper limit on the number of refugees that we will take on board.

Instead we need a strong and decisive Europe. Focusing on national solutions to this global challenge might seem tempting, yet it is nothing but an illusion. And more than that: terminating the principle of European solidarity puts the European idea as a whole at risk.

In view of a divided Europe, right-wing populism is on the rise again. Freedom of movement within the Schengen area – a major achievement of our integration process – is in danger.

We cannot allow ourselves to stand on the sideline of this conflict. We have built this continent for over half a century; we have put enormous efforts, power and strength into achieving a truly united Europe. Together we have managed to overcome huge challenges in the past and present. And yet again, we are facing truly historic tasks: to offer shelter to the truly needy, to integrate men, women and children into our societies, but also to reduce and control the steady influx of migrants to Europe.

However difficult this might seem, it also holds a good chance for success: We have already taken steps towards a European solution, the European Commission has already put forward the outlines of a broader mandate for Frontex, and we are working hard to implement the far-reaching agreement with Turkey in order to reduce and manage the flow of refugees. Clearly, we will not achieve a solution overnight. But we are already in the process of implementing a bundle of measures that will help us tackle the crisis.

I admit: this is not going to be an easy road, but it is the only one which will not lead into a dead end. Ultimately, however, we will not be able to bring the influx of refugees back down to manageable levels unless we address its root causes – most importantly by defusing the violent conflicts and crises that have been destabilizing Europe's southern and eastern neighborhood.

These are trying times for the European Union. Striking a balance between the common European interest in maintaining an effective and humane refugee policy on the one hand and the need to build and maintain political majorities in member states will remain a key challenge.

On the international stage, Germany has stepped up its efforts to contribute to political and diplomatic solutions. This is more often than not a painstaking process, requiring persistence and patience, but we have recently made important progress. The nuclear accord with Iran shows that it was possible to negotiate a solution for a proliferation crisis that had an immediate potential to become a hot war. And it may yet turn out to be a crucial milestone on the way to resolving other violent conflicts in the region.

> "Germany has stepped up its efforts to contribute to political and diplomatic solutions."

In the case of Syria, we have managed for the first time to bring to the negotiating table all the crucial international and regional actors needed for a political solution. More importantly, these actors have agreed on a road map for a political solution – including a ceasefire and the outlines of a transition process – which was endorsed by a resolution of the Security Council. There is still a very long way to go, and none of the steps ahead will be easy – the recent escalation between Saudi Arabia and Iran bears witness to that. But crises like these can and must be alleviated by diplomacy. Our message to Riyadh and Tehran is clear: Both countries bear a broader responsibility for the stability of the region.

In Eastern Europe we have also made some real progress since we last met at the Munich Security Conference. The situation in Ukraine is far from perfect. Yet compared to the situation we had last summer, when we were almost running into an open war, Ukraine and the whole of Europe are much better off today. The Minsk process has delivered a marked reduction in violence and casualties.

Without any doubt, there is still a lot of work ahead of us: Frequent violations of the ceasefire must stop. Every shot that is fired is still one too many. At the same time, a constitutional reform for decentralization in Ukraine and the elaboration of a special status law for certain areas in eastern Ukraine remain decisive for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention in Ukraine have stirred many concerns and fears, especially among our Eastern European NATO allies. That is why Germany has politically supported and militarily contributed to the alliance's reassurance and adaptation measures.

At the same time we need to complement reassurance with a reinvigoration of our dialogue with Russia: I am speaking of a dialogue that should identify areas of common interest but also clearly spell out where we have sharp differences. The core principles of European security, as enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter, are not up for negotiation. Reaffirming them is exactly what Germany will strive for during our OSCE Chairmanship. Our guiding motives for this chairmanship are renewing dialogue, rebuilding trust and restoring security.

In all of these endeavors – be it in the Middle East or in Eastern Europe – our transatlantic relationship is of critical importance. The diplomatic punch and the security guarantee of the United States remain indispensable. It is in this context that Germany actively contributes to conflict resolution, be it in the context of the E3+3 or the Vienna talks on Syria.

Germany wants to be a facilitator, enabling dialogue and supporting negotiation processes. We have stepped up our commitment of both diplomatic energy and resources to civilian stabilization and reconstruction, efforts that are essential to pave the way towards longer-term peace in conflict areas. A case in point is Iraq, where we are helping to quickly rebuild public services and critical infrastructure in areas liberated from ISIS. We are convinced that these measures are essential in order to restore the confidence of the Iraqi people in their public institutions. In Tikrit, this stabilization operation has allowed more than 150,000 internally displaced persons to return to their homes, and we are preparing to deliver the same support in Sinjar, Ramadi and elsewhere.

Relying on diplomacy, crisis prevention and stabilization does not rule out military engagement if and where it is a necessary component of a peace effort. We all know that a group like ISIS, which is not interested in negotiated solutions or peace accords, will not be defeated without military means.

Germany has decided to contribute reconnaissance assets, logistical support and protection to the fight against ISIS, as well as providing training and equipment to the Kurdish Peshmerga, who are fighting ISIS on the ground. Germany is also contributing, alongside its NATO allies and other partners, to international missions in Afghanistan, Sudan and Mali.

In sum, Germany's international responsibility has many facets – domestically, on the European level and with regard to global peace efforts. We must use the full spectrum of our foreign policy and security toolbox in an effective and coherent way, from conflict prevention to post-conflict stabilization. The political processes to solve conflicts and crises will always be at center stage, involving persistent efforts and patience. The conclusion of the nuclear agreement with Iran and the beginning of its implementation is a heartening example that such efforts can indeed be successful. ■

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Doing the possible

and foe. A Trump presidency is a particularly worrisome prospect for America's allies. Their plea is like that of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks: "Stay sane America, please!"

At the same time, the trials and tribulations of the refugee crisis strike at the heart of the European project. For the first time in half a century, one can no longer preclude that the EU, battered by economic malaise, the migrant emergency and terrorism, will collapse and splinter. The crisis has revealed fundamental differences between the member states about the nature, purpose and destination of their union.

A trend toward renationalization threatens to tear the EU into several blocs. In Eastern Europe, a lack of solidarity and, as in Hungary and Poland, a proclivity toward illiberalism gnaws at the foundations of the European project. In Scandinavia, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and even Germany, the burgeoning right wing continues to denigrate the European idea. Their aim: not only exodus from the Brussels community but *excitus* EU.

Russia, too, is a country in transition. The question is whether the country's dire economic freefall will make Putin more amenable to seek the cooperation of the West, or whether dwindling GDP will incite him to look for foreign scapegoats. His Syrian intervention has returned the Kremlin leader to the top table of world politics; that must soothe his ego. It is obvious, however, that at best he can be a spoiler, not a shaper – unless he opts for accommodation and conciliation.

China is also in the throes of fundamental change. Growth has dropped from 10 percent annually to about 6.8 percent; 4 percent, some experts argue, may be more realistic. This "new normal" is forcing the Communist party to reform its economic model while at the same time buttressing the party's leading position – a highly risky experiment. While we cannot expect Beijing to mollify its aggressive policies in the South China and East China Seas, its "One Belt, One Road" is likely to remain a grandiose scheme with little substance.

International politics has become a "G-zero world" with no shared values, standards or priorities (Ian Bremmer). Global hegemony is no longer possible. While Washington will remain preeminent for decades, it will no longer predominate. Nor can any other nation don the cap of world policeman.

The Middle East is experiencing an extraordinary level of violent turmoil. The state system is fraying in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. Except in Tunisia, the Arab Spring has ended in dictatorial winter. The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) is imposing its writ on Mesopotamia. Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in intense proxy warfare. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, although no longer central to the region, continues to fester; another intifada seems more likely than any diplomatic settlement, two-state or otherwise. Afghanistan's future after ISAF is parlous at best.

The Levant stands before a long phase of turbulence. It will take decades for the Muslim arc of crisis to find its future shape, viable national borders and an enlightened attitude to religious diversity. The explosive mix of elite failure, terrorism and mass migration defies military solutions.

The same goes for many regional flashpoints in Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, the smoldering conflict between India and Pakistan, the Chinese-Chinese tug-of-war over Taiwan, the dangerous Korean tinderbox and steadily increasing tensions between China and the US are cause for global concern.

Looking at the world as it is, not as we wish it were, one cannot help but feel that our leaders should welcome another revenant: realpolitik. In other words, secure your defenses but do not eschew dialogue; contain where necessary and cooperate where possible; bear in mind humanitarian principles, but not as the sole benchmark for securing your interests; avoid bluster and blame; tolerate differences among nations while simultaneously building on common interests.

Our diplomats are beginning to use a new term for this: "compartmentalized cooperation." It is a method for dealing with friends as well as rivals and adversaries: disagree where your interests diverge, but join hands wherever they coincide; turn red-hot conflicts into frozen ones rather than bull-headedly pursuing maximum objectives. Strategic patience is a virtue, not a vice. Avoiding disasters must be accorded absolute priority. De-escalatory diplomacy is the order of the day. ■

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The hour of populism

Since the euro crisis, the continent has been quarreling over the distribution of refugees – and the demagogues are having a field day | By Peter H. Koepf and Lutz Lichtenberger

The latest wave of agitation to spread over Germany was triggered this week by a Green Party mayor. A professor – a member of his party – said to him: "I have two blonde daughters, and I worry if 60 Arab men are living now only 200 meters away."

It is less the fear of Syrian or Iraqi men, and more a matter of votes that has induced parts of Europe's political establishment to voice words formerly reserved exclusively for populists and Islamophobes.

In Germany the political movement for malcontents is called Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). In March the party managed double-digit results in regional elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt. They are attracting fearful, anxious voters with populist slogans like "The boat is full," "Tighten the borders" and "Rapid repatriation," while offering a thick helping of cynicism: "Syrian men should stay in their own country to fight IS."

Those on the campaign trail while already in government know very well that there are no easy solutions, large or small, to the refugee distribution crisis. Migration policy requires tough negotiations, which may entail only baby steps of progress and compromises that are not always so elegant.

And how is it acceptable to block Syrians and Iraqis in their attempt to trade violence, war and despotism for democracy and a chance at life? Neither the European Convention on Human Rights nor the Geneva Refugee Convention allows for people to be sent back to countries in which they were persecuted or treated inhumanely.

The crudest form of pandering to the ire of the people can currently be found in the US presidential race. Donald Trump is all too eager to agitate against Muslims and Mexicans, wants to build fences and walls and claims he would allow not one Syrian refugee to enter the country. All the while, the billionaire presents himself as the advocate of the common man against the excesses of global capitalism.

And here he strikes a tone that also resonates in Europe, where adherents to right-wing populist politicians feel neglected, unfairly treated and not taken seriously for their genuine concerns.

There are people who fear globalism in its current form, have already been victimized by it, or at least feel they have; people who see that the rich are becoming richer, and the poor are becoming poorer; that countries are engaged in a divisive and unsustainable race to ruin by offering tax havens to international corporations; that banks, which were bailed out with taxpayer money, are raking in profits with the same old business models and are allowed to keep them; that they are footing the bill for the wild parties of yesteryear with their unemployment and plummeting wages. They believe politicians to be the lackeys of the long-since uncontrollable business conglomerates and to have more or less abdicated their responsibility to protect the people from them.

The bottom line: the representatives of the people no longer have the situation under control. And to cap it all off, here come hundreds of thousands of young men from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, people from different cultures with different religions and different value systems, who will compete – or so some believe – for our jobs, housing and social benefits.

And this is not only in Germany. In France, where elections are set for spring 2017, the right-wing populist Marine Le Pen is preying on people's fear of the Islamization of Europe. Denmark's extreme-right Liberal Party government has passed a law – evidently as a deterrent to migration – requiring incoming refugees to surrender money and valuables, which has long been the case

Refugees in Slovenia. PICTURE ALLIANCE/PIXSELL/PETAR GLEBOV

in Switzerland. Croatia's conservative HDZ won parliamentary elections in November with promises of using the military to curb the number of asylum-seekers. And in Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland, where, as in Slovakia, hardly anyone is seeking asylum, politicians are fomenting an atmosphere hostile to refugees and the EU. The Social Democrat Robert Fico is campaigning to remain prime minister with the slogan: "We protect Slovakia." He is promising to "make no decision on a voluntary basis that would allow for the emergence of a Muslim community in Slovakia."

Does this stir up anger or is the anger already there from the mere 169 asylum requests in 2015, and the additional 149 Christians who were flown in from an Iraqi refugee camp in December. "2016 will be the year in which the EU either brings the refugee crisis under control or breaks into pieces."

What is the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)?

The right-wing populist party was founded in 2013 in reaction to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's efforts to save the euro. The party was formed predominantly by economics professors, whose criticisms were wonky at best. Yet more important was that, for the first time, Germany had a somewhat serious party to the right of Merkel's Christian Democrats. Over the last year a shrewd populist faction of the AfD has successfully exploited the refugee crisis to take over the party. The AfD has since sharpened its rhetoric, which, according to all public opinion polls, has paid off handsomely.

But on what concrete basis would the EU threaten to crumble? The crisis is not the number of refugees. "A continent of 500 million citizens cannot fold under 1.5 to 2 million refugees!" said Germany's Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference, in a passionate defense of Europe rarely seen today. Europe could crumble, however, if country after country closes ranks and erects fences. And it was no sign of solidarity or other European values when the more centrally located countries of Greece and Italy, along with Turkey, had to go it alone and the UN was forced literally to reduce rations to the Syrian refugees because rich donor countries have become stingy.

The EU would not crumble, but rather grow both morally and politically if every country took in its fair share of refugees. If all member states gathered to finally (and again) give Syria's neighbors enough funds to care for the cold and hungry. If all countries were to recalibrate their actions around this question of common values: solidarity, human rights, humanistic thinking, liberalism, rule of law, the welfare state, cooperation, democracy and the dissolution of all old hostilities.

It was Germany's great sociologist of the early 20th century, Max Weber, who coined the famous dictum that "politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards." No great feat is required – not the leadership of a great man or great woman – but rather a steady course of specific steps. Sure, confronting the causes of migration is essential; this has indeed been the case for years. But that would have been easier in peacetime than during this year of hard heartedness and dwindling empathy. Confronting the causes of migration is a heavy load: helping restore the economy so that the people have schools, work and enough food. But where to get the money? Stronger taxation of higher incomes, capital gains and inheritance along with international agreements against profit shifting within global corporations would be a few options. These would require a self-proclaimed socialist – or, in reality and in the original sense of the term, social democratic – candidate, even in the US, a possibility that cannot entirely be ruled out considering Bernie Sanders' surprising success early on in America's Democratic Party primaries.

However, solutions based on solidarity face the panic of the fearful and the tendency of many politicians to exploit it. Subduing the refugee crisis takes time, as was the case with the step-by-step approach to the euro crisis. Negotiating solutions requires calm, not clamor, composure, not panic – as Chancellor Merkel has shown, despite tremendous pressure and plummeting poll numbers. Europe will not crack from immigration, provided that sensible regulations accompany it; the EU could crack if the retreat behind national borders continues and if fundamental European values are betrayed, particularly now as they face their greatest test in decades. Egoism and Europe are a poor match. ■

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On the sidelines no more

Two years into Germany's "new" foreign policy

By Volker Perthes

IMAGE.NET/NEWS

Germany's new level of international co-leadership: Angela Merkel engaged in joint crisis management with David Cameron, François Hollande and Arseniy Yatsenyuk (from left).

Two years ago, at the 2014 Munich Security Conference, Germany's President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen all signaled that Germany, henceforth, was willing to play a more substantive role in international politics, particularly with regard to crisis management. Most of Germany's partners and foes have indeed seen that something has changed in Berlin's foreign policy behavior. Some, quite naturally, still criticize Germany for contributing too little; others applaud what they see in terms of leadership; and still others worry about the way Germany leads where it does. This was particularly evident with regard to the refugee crisis, where more than a few EU partners complained that Berlin had failed to consult them.

Even in previous years, Germany was not exactly *machtvergessen*, i.e. oblivious to its international weight and power. Just ask policy makers from Greece. The last two years, however, were something like a crash course in geopolitical realism for post-Cold War Germany. Lessons included the Russian annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine; the explosion of Syria; the participation of jihadists with German or other European passports in the Syrian war; terrorist attacks in Europe; and an unprecedented influx of refugees.

While the European Union has only received some 3 percent or less of all refugees worldwide, the number of arrivals has significantly strained the capacities of states at the EU's external borders as well as of major recipient countries. The stream of refugees has triggered tensions within the EU and has furthered right-wing populist movements almost everywhere on the continent.

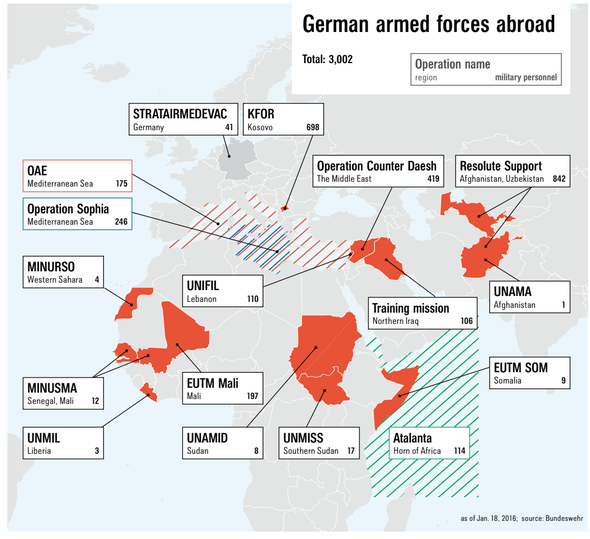
More generally, Germans and Europeans are increasingly coming to realize that their idea of institutionalized multilateralism and multilateral decision-making is not shared by most of their partners in the rest of the world. They have had to accept that the United States is no longer prepared to take the lead in any crisis at any time, while rising or re-emerging powers, notably China, India and Brazil, seem yet unprepared to contribute effectively to the global order. As a result, regional orders have been threatened, not only in the neighborhood of Europe, but in Europe itself.

At the same time, dividing lines between the domestic and international spheres have all but disappeared. The refugee crisis, for example, demands policy approaches that span diplomacy, defense, development, European integration, homeland security and social policy.

Crises that have impact on German and European security are no longer separable from one another: Refugees, Syria, Russia, terrorism and EU problem-solving capacity have merged into one single crisis landscape.

Germans and other Europeans have had to learn that conflicts on their periphery will not simply burn out and may not be containable. They were also forced to acknowledge that major crises in their vicinity will not be resolved, at least not in the short term, but will need to be managed over extended periods.

This changing environment has certainly helped German policy makers develop their country's international profile. Germany has taken the diplomatic lead in the crisis of Russia's presence in Ukraine; it was a key participant in the nuclear negotiations with Iran; it is involved, as a member of the International Syria Support Group, in recent efforts to find a political solution to the Syrian war; and it has accepted the OSCE presidency for 2016. Moreover, Berlin has beefed up its contribution to NATO reassurance measures in the Baltic region and Central Europe. It is also increasingly prepared to contribute military forces to crisis interventions outside NATO's area: as part of UN efforts in Mali, as one of the countries prolonging their military engagement in Afghanistan, with arms deliveries and training activities in Northern Iraq, and more recently with reconnaissance flights over Syria and other measures to support France and the US-led coalition against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS).



Policymakers in Berlin are aware that their European and international partners expect this new level of international co-leadership to become a regular feature of German policies, not just an accidental one. Berlin no longer sees this as a challenge. Rather, these expectations are matched by a growing interest in sustaining the influence Germany has won, not least in diplomatic formats where, despite not being a permanent member of the Security Council, it figures prominently, such as the P5+1 on Iran and the "Normandy Quartet" to address the crisis in Ukraine.

German policy preferences are relatively stable. Even with an increased preparedness to use military force in UN, NATO or EU operations, Germany does not see itself as a military power. Influence can also be won by political and economic means, indeed, in the view of the German elite, much more effectively.

Germany will remain a promoter of a rules-based international order – both in the pan-European realm and globally – and still prefers to act and, where appropriate, lead in association with partners such as France, rather than alone. German policy makers may yet have to learn that it is not always enough to do what is "right" when partners who may even share Berlin's objectives don't feel sufficiently consulted.

Ironically, perhaps, the more Germany assumes leadership roles internationally, the more it becomes dependent on other international actors. The outcome of the US elections will also determine the coherence of the Western community of states; the possible electoral success of the Front National in France could make Germany feel rather lonely in Europe. Further state failures in Europe's south will have all EU states, including Germany, opting for security rather than partnership vis-à-vis the south. And China's regional posture, along with the way Washington and Beijing manage their strategic relationship, will affect German and European efforts to promote multilateral solutions for global challenges such as climate change and cybersecurity.

For all these reasons, we should expect Germany to increase its resources available for foreign and security policy over the next few years. Berlin neither meets NATO's 2-percent-of-GDP target for defense nor the 0.7 percent Official Development Assistance (ODA) quota; however, unlike some of its partners it has not slashed its defense budget and has substantially increased funding for diplomacy. Berlin is likely to further develop its diplomatic toolbox, focusing on the opportunities of digital diplomacy and on a more networked national and European foreign policy that takes the activities and possible contributions of non-state actors into consideration. Also expect Germany to become more conscious and transparent about its national interests.

Given the high level of international connectivity not only of the German economy, Germany is vulnerable even to geographically distant developments. As a middle power, however, it cannot be present everywhere with the same level of involvement.

The freedom of the seas in general and more specifically the prevention of military conflict in the South China Sea constitute obvious and fundamental German interests. An aggressive Chinese pursuit of hegemonic aspirations would not only threaten regional stability, but also undermine the international order at large, which Germany and Europe see as vital for their security and well-being.

For Berlin, the solution is not to reduce its engagement in and with China. Rather, Germany is in the process of politicizing its approach to Asia: i.e., engaging in a more open political debate with Chinese leaders while simultaneously increasing its cooperation in all policy fields with like-minded countries in the Pacific Rim, such as Australia or South Korea.

At the same time, there is little doubt that the main focus of Germany's foreign and security policies will be on the eastern and southern vicinities of the EU and on Europe itself. After all, geography remains a critical factor. Immediate security risks tend to emanate from nearby rather than from distant regions; societies are more closely linked; and the capabilities Germany and the EU can muster to manage conflicts, stabilize countries and support economic and political transformation will be more effective in their immediate environment than in other parts of the world.

The EU will certainly remain Germany's main framework of action. Given the turbulence in the world around us, Germany has a fundamental interest in strengthening the foreign policy and security policy dimensions of the EU. It is one thing for German policy makers to enjoy the heightened global demand for German contributions to international politics and privileged relations with Germany. But they must also do more to explain at home that without the EU, Germany – like France and the UK – would be a much less relevant, less secure and less prosperous international actor. ■

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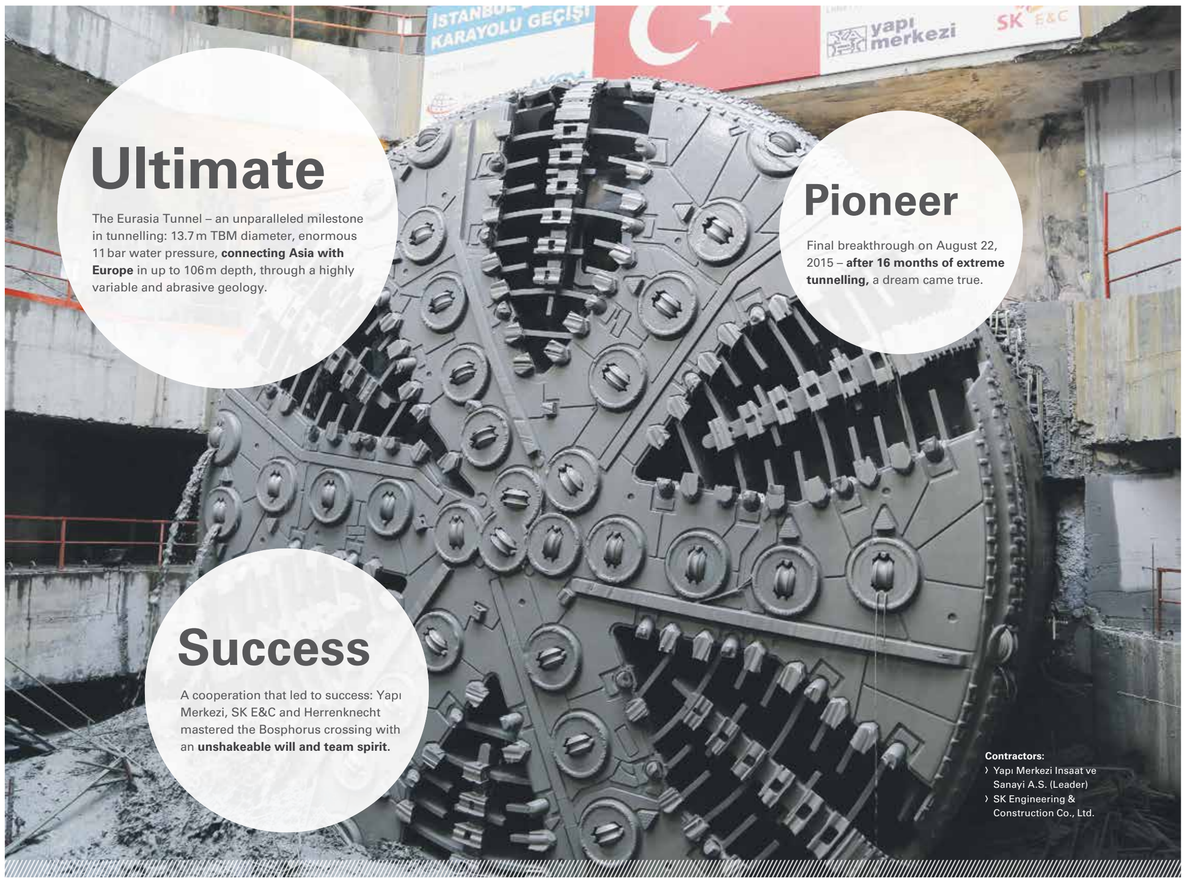

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Monitoring mission: The OSCE special commission confirms weapons withdrawal from the contact line in the Donetsk People's Republic.

Letting go

Even if full implementation of Minsk II seems unlikely, the EU and US should continue pressing all parties to meet its provisions | By Steven Pifer

Approaching its one-year anniversary, the February 2015 Minsk II agreement to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donbass region is not faring well. All of its provisions were to have been implemented by Dec. 31, 2015. Few were. Yet Minsk II remains the only settlement arrangement on offer and continues to command at least rhetorical support in Kiev and Moscow. For the foreseeable future, however, it appears that Donbass is destined to occupy a place on the list of frozen (or not-so-frozen) conflicts dotting the post-Soviet space.

Following Russia's military seizure of Crimea, an armed separatist conflict broke out in eastern Ukraine in April 2014. Moscow gave the separatists significant support: leadership, funding and heavy weapons as well as political backing. When the Ukrainian military appeared on the verge of retaking the Donbass in August 2014, regular units of the Russian army intervened.

A ceasefire was hastily brokered in Minsk in September 2014, but it never seriously took hold. Fighting continued while discussions in the trilateral contact group – chaired by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and involving representatives of the Ukrainian government, separatists and Russian government – made little headway. In February 2015, with a looming possibility of a resumption of full-scale conflict, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande brokered the Minsk II agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and President Petro Poroshenko of Ukraine.

Minsk II provided for a ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons from the line of contact within two weeks' time. Other provisions laid out the terms for a political settlement, including the release of prisoners, a special status for Donbass, local elections, constitutional reform to provide for the decentralization of authority to local governments and the restoration of full Ukrainian control over its border with Russia.

Implementation of Minsk II got off to a poor start. Separatist and Russian forces ignored the ceasefire and instead launched a major attack at the key rail center in Debaltseve. While the line of contact separating the two sides subsequently stabilized, the sides continued to exchange fire. In August 2015 the Ukrainians reported as many as 200 ceasefire violations per day.

Things improved somewhat in autumn. The ceasefire took better hold in September and the sides withdrew much of their heavy weaponry, though not all fighting came to end. In October Poroshenko, Putin, Merkel and Hollande met in Paris and agreed that local elections in the separatist-occupied parts of Donbass should be postponed until they could be organized in accordance with Ukrainian law and under OSCE observation, as provided for by Minsk II. The separatists, under some pressure from Moscow, agreed to the postponement.

Kiev and the separatists have yet to agree on terms for holding the elections. The separatists demand that Donbass receive special status before the elections are held, while the Ukrainian government demands that the elections should be held first and then certified by OSCE to have met democratic standards. In another possible complication, a separatist leader has said that pro-government political parties would not be allowed to compete in the local elections.

Furthermore, Ukrainian officials argue that the separatists and Russians have failed to meet key Minsk II provisions, including the withdrawal of foreign forces and military equipment from Ukraine, full access for OSCE to the Donbass, the release of all illegally detained persons and the restoration of Ukrainian control over the border. The separatists claim that Kiev has not yet granted amnesty and has not enacted constitutional reforms to provide for decentralization.

Concerning decentralization, on Aug. 31, 2015, the Rada (Ukraine's parliament) passed a constitutional amendment on first reading with 265 votes. The vote generated controversy as opponents criticized it for rewarding the separatists. The Radical Party, one of five that constitutes the pro-government coalition, left the vote in protest. The amendment must pass on second reading with a constitutional majority of 300 votes. In a new twist, Prime Minister Yatsenyuk suggested on Jan. 24 that the amendment instead be put to a referendum.

> "Russia is not yet prepared to reach a settlement of the crisis in eastern Ukraine, at least not on terms that would be considered reasonable for Kiev."

Most disturbingly, perhaps, leaders of the "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk have repeatedly stated that they will not accept a restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty, which is, of course, the ultimate objective of Minsk II.

All the agreement's provisions were to have been implemented by the end of 2015. In a Dec. 30 phone conversation, Poroshenko, Putin, Merkel and Hollande agreed to extend the deadline into 2016, but did not fix a specific date.

While Russia moved promptly to annex Crimea in March 2014, it has given no indication of similar intentions regarding Donbass. Crimea has historical significance for Moscow and hosts the Black Sea Fleet. Moreover, it is proving a financial burden, and most analysts believe that Donbass would impose an even heavier burden. The Kremlin appears to regard Donbass as a means to destabilize Kiev and to make it more difficult for the central government to proceed with needed reforms and implementation of the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement.

Moscow's apparent support for ratcheting down the violence in Donbass and for postponing local elections there, coupled with the appointment of Boris Gryzlov, a Kremlin insider, as Russia's point-person for the conflict, have led some to suggest that Russian policy may be changing. They argue that Kremlin policy has hit a dead end in Donbass, that Moscow has now turned its attention to Syria, and that the Russian economy is in more difficult straits than anticipated. The economy contracted by 4 percent in 2015 and, faced with the low price of oil and Western economic sanctions, is expected to contract further in 2016.

Kremlin policy may be changing. But it is also possible that Moscow has concluded that, at this point in time, no further destabilization is necessary. Politics in Kiev has become more difficult over the past half-year. In addition to the Radical Party's departure from the pro-government coalition, rifts have reportedly broken out between Poroshenko and Yatsenyuk while public approval ratings for both leaders and the government's performance have plunged.

Absent a more serious effort by Moscow to implement the Minsk II provisions, all indicators point to the conclusion that Russia is not yet prepared to reach a settlement of the crisis in eastern Ukraine, at least not on terms that would be considered reasonable for Kiev.

The most likely state in which Donbass will remain into the foreseeable future is thus a frozen (or not-so-frozen) conflict, where there is no major fighting yet no complete ceasefire, and where negotiations on implementing Minsk II continue yet show scant real progress. That would allow the Kremlin to ratchet up the conflict at a later point if it desired to further pressure Kiev.

The Ukrainian government, while regularly reiterating its desire to implement Minsk II and restore sovereignty over all of Donbass, may consider a frozen conflict acceptable for the near to medium term. Kiev is not in a position to assume economic responsibility for Donbass, which would require significant humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funds to repair the heavy damage caused by nearly two years of fighting. Some privately question whether Ukraine should seek the return of Donbass or just let it go. It is not apparent, however, that letting Donbass go would settle matters with Russia, particularly as Moscow appears to use Donbass as leverage to pressure Kiev, rather to pursue securing the territory as part of Russia.

The EU and US should continue pressing all parties to implement the Minsk II provisions, even if full implementation seems unlikely. That means urging Kiev to do its share. If, or when, it is concluded that Minsk II has failed, the Ukrainian government should be in a position to say that it did everything in its power to honor the agreement, so that the blame will rest squarely with Russia and the separatists.

The key to settling the conflict continues to lie in Moscow, which has decisive influence on the separatists. Western policy should aim to change the calculation of costs and benefits underlying the Kremlin's policy toward Ukraine.

The West should continue to give Kiev political support and – provided that the government accelerates economic and anti-corruption reforms – additional financial assistance, with the aim of bolstering Ukraine's resilience. Additional military assistance should be provided with the objective of driving up the costs of any renewed offensive by separatist and Russian forces.

The West should make clear to Moscow that a return to more normal relations will depend on the Kremlin changing its policy toward Ukraine. In particular, the EU and US should hold to their position that sanctions will be eased only after Minsk II is fully implemented. As for the separate issue of Crimea, Kiev has wisely said it should be addressed in the longer term. Western sanctions linked to Crimea should continue to apply.

Above and beyond Ukraine, the West must take into account the broader implications of Moscow's use of military force against Ukraine. While the likelihood of Russian military action against a NATO member state is low, it cannot be entirely discounted. NATO should take steps to bolster its conventional forces and deterrent capabilities in the Baltic States and Poland.

In many quarters of the West there is interest in engaging Russia, which should certainly be a part of the EU and US approach. But the West should recognize that the more effectively it bolsters Ukraine and demonstrates NATO's readiness to deter other Russian provocations, the more likely it will be that engagement will prove fruitful. ■

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IMAGO/XINHUA

Wrath of the people: Iranian protests against Saudi Arabia after the execution of Baqir al-Nimr, Jan. 4, 2016.

Standoff in the Gulf

Saudi Arabia and Iran: an escalating struggle for hegemony in the Middle East | By Tomas Avenarius

Whenever the topic is the Middle East, its oil, overt or covert civil wars, Islamist terrorism or Islam itself, we keep hearing a well-worn bit of wisdom from Western diplomats, policy makers and the business community: No one can afford the luxury of alienating Saudi Arabia.

That's true. The Arabian Desert kingdom is an oil super-heavyweight, the leading Arab power in the Gulf as well as the global lead nation of Islam.

However, even before the international nuclear agreement with Iran was signed and sealed in July 2015, a second insight challenging the old doctrine began gaining currency: that today, no one can safely ignore the Islamic Republic of Iran, a rising petro power aspiring towards regional hegemony, a growth market of the future and the most important voice for Shiite Muslims, not least within the Arab world.

The problem with this bilateral configuration on the Persian Gulf is not only that, even for the most hard-boiled policy makers, both states set unattractive examples with respect to their treatment of civil and human rights, democracy and rule of law. The two regimes are world leaders in their use of the death penalty; both in part employ Sharia law; both suppress any real opposition.

In Saudi Arabia, except for one experiment at the local level and – unlike Iran with its highly restricted yet thoroughly active parliament – there's no voting at all. Women's rights are a grim matter not only among the Saudis, but in many respects the Iranians as well.

The view is no more upbeat concerning direct or indirect support for terrorist groups, militias or resistance movements as extended policy arms. Whether it's Tehran's backing of Hezbollah in Lebanon, other Shiite militias in Syria's civil war or the fighting in Iraq, or the Saudi patronage of Syrian rebels and parts of the anti-government forces in Iraq, both countries are extremely problematic and often dubious allies – but also deep-pocketed business partners and indispensable regional actors.

Even more explosive for pragmatically inclined Western politicians is the fact that the two predominant Gulf powers, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, have been deeply hostile for decades. That makes relations with these states at the Straits of Hormuz – through which a quarter of the world's traded oil passes – an enormously delicate matter. The Saudi-Iranian conflict, after escalating for months, has by now taken on the dimensions of a Middle East cold war.

The struggle that began three and a half decades ago in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution in Tehran is now being conducted through proxy wars and thinly veiled political conflicts throughout the Middle East. Saudi and Iranian interests collide and clash mercilessly in the wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. They each have a barely concealed hand in Lebanon and Palestine. Even the global petroleum market is a theater in this conflict. Saudi Arabia is waging a pricing war on the global oil market. The price of a barrel of crude oil has fallen dramatically during the past year. Energy analysts think the market could go to as low as $20 per barrel, with only a medium-term rebound on the horizon.

Saudi Arabia's ever-higher output is flooding the global market with cheap oil – much to the detriment of its own revenue, which is all but completely dependent on oil. This tactic is no longer aimed chiefly at the US and its rising production levels thanks to fracking. It's also targeting Iran, which is set to return to the oil market now that its sanctions have been lifted as part of the newly forged nuclear agreement.

In the multiple conflicts in the region, loose ends almost always lead back to the two Gulf rivals, and therefore to an institutionalized competition presenting itself increasingly as an intra-Muslim sectarian conflict between the majority Sunni and minority Shiite communities.

At its heart, however, this is a politically driven conflict of interests between two states over hegemony in this strategically vital region. When all is said and done, the catch phrases "Sunnis against Shiites" and "Arabs against Persians" can no longer veil the fundamental conflict between the archconservative Saudi kingdom and the physically and ideologically aging revolutionary Shiite clerics in Iran.

The conflict finally broke out into the open at the beginning of 2016. "The battle of the beards" was the headline of one German mass-market newspaper on the sudden Saudi-Iranian escalation. Enraged at Saudi Arabia's execution of a dissident Shiite cleric, Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, as part of a mass execution of 47 Saudis in early January, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei threatened the Saudis with "divine retribution" for the death of Nimr. A mob that seemed just waiting to be activated then attacked and set fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Incensed at this gross violation of diplomatic standards and international protocol, Riyadh broke off relations with its neighbor and pressured other Arab states to follow suit. Bahrain, Kuwait, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates withdrew their diplomats from Tehran, the Arab League sent a bellicose letter of protest to Tehran over the embassy attack, and the Royal Saudi Air Force resumed its bombing campaign in Yemen, its war-torn southern neighbor, breaking a ceasefire that had been negotiated just a few weeks earlier.

Once again, the front now clearly follows the borders of the Sunni-ruled Arab states under Saudi leadership. At least for the time being, Iran can rely on its allies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, which are all Shiite-dominated in one way or another and form part of the Shiite arc by which Tehran – much to the dismay of the Gulf's Sunni regimes, along with Egypt and Jordan – exerts its influence throughout the Arab world.

Just how much of a threat Riyadh regards its neighbor, both before and after the nuclear agreement, was made clear in a remark by Saudi King Abdullah, who died last year. In a leaked diplomatic cable, he told the US government: It's time to "cut off the snake's head."

Abdullah was overtly urging Saudi Arabia's American ally to bomb Iran's nuclear installations – something the US, as we know, did not do. Instead, President Barack Obama pushed forward with the nuclear deal with Iran, which was concluded in July 2015. It allowed the Saudis' archenemy to return to the global market and to the international stage. No longer is it a pariah state and part of the alleged "axis of evil." The Saudis felt betrayed by the Americans, who had once been their closest ally.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with its population of 30 million, has neither a constitution nor a legal codex that encompasses all areas of law. The basis for parts of its jurisprudence remains the Koran and Sharia law. Unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia – where the state religion is a rigid interpretation of Sunni Islam called Wahhabism – is not a clerical state and not a theocracy. Since the establishment of modern Saudi Arabia in 1932, the foundation of the monarchy, which regards and legitimizes itself as the custodian of all Islam's holy sites of Mecca and Medina, has been an iron pact between the Saud dynasty and Wahhabi Muslim scholars. From the beginning, this alliance has severely restricted the monarchy's capacity to reform.

For its part, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with a population of almost 80 million, was created in a revolution against a secular monarch. The fall of the Shah led to the proclamation of a firmly Shiite republic that has both a president and a parliament. Strategic policy and de facto leadership, however, lie in the hands of a "spiritual leader" appointed by a council of experts, mainly clerics. The Vilayat-e Faqih devised by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini means "rule by the supreme religious scholar." In its early days the Islamic Republic also espoused a doctrine of "exporting revolution," spreading fear among the Gulf monarchs and prompting them to establish the Gulf Cooperation Council as a defensive alliance against their unpredictable neighbor.

Even if Tehran has stopped openly propagating the export of revolution, the conflict focuses more on the role of Shiites in the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia has a comparatively large Shiite minority concentrated in the oil-producing areas in the east, which for decades has felt marginalized by the royal family and its Wahhabi Sunni doctrine. This fact has repeatedly led to protests. In 2011 during the Arab Spring, the problem was compounded by a Shiite uprising in the tiny neighboring state of Bahrain, where Shiites constitute the majority of the population but are ruled by a Sunni royal family closely allied with the Saudis. That explains why the uprising was quickly put down by forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council with the Saudis in the vanguard.

In the Saudis' view, ever since the Iran nuclear deal was finalized, their once-best friends in the West have been falling over themselves to court their Iranian enemy. Most sanctions have been lifted. The red carpet laid for Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on his European tour demonstrated clearly to the leadership in Riyadh just how much the Iranians have risen in European and American esteem since the agreement. Iran, internationally isolated since the Islamic Revolution, is returning to the world market, head unbowed. After three and a half decades of isolation, its decrepit infrastructure requires the investment of billions in nearly all economic areas.

The planned contracts for the European aviation sector alone are raising eyebrows. Iran's state-run airline is ordering 114 jets from Airbus, a huge stroke of luck for the European aircraft manufacturer. Over the longer term Iran will need up to 400 planes to modernize its fully derelict fleet, which suffered for decades from the inaccessibility of spare parts. The Iranians are even interested in US-made Boeing jets.

The Iranians need to catch up in numerous sectors: automobiles, rail transport, machine tools, health care, agriculture and much more. During Rouhani's visit to Rome, his Italian hosts not only showed respect for their Muslim guest by serving fruit juice instead of wine (not an uncommon gesture for Muslim state visits), they also covered up the nude sculptures at the Capitoline Museum (an exceedingly unusual gesture, even for Muslim guests). The president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a nation highly sensitive to more than just this issue, was treated to a shock-free reception for thoroughly profane reasons. Rouhani was on a shopping spree. After the lifting of international sanctions Iran has gained access again to some 100 million euros in frozen assets. In this case, respect for the sensitivities of others should pay off. ■

PICTURE ALLIANCE / ABACA/RIEXPIX

PICTURE ALLIANCE/DPA/BERND VON JUTRCZENKA

Adversaries: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (left), and Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, King and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia.

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Soon back in Assad's hands? The ruins of Aleppo.

IMAGO/ZUMA PRESS

Overly optimistic?

The new Syria peace process is in peril before it has even begun | By Andrea Böhm

In early September 2015 the picture of three-year-old Alan Kurdi shook the world. The photo of the dead boy, having drowned after a boat holding Syrian refugees capsized on the Turkish coast, caused an international outcry. Heads of state expressed their shock, French President François Hollande demanded a shared European refugee policy and other politicians called for new efforts to end the war in Syria.

Five months later Syrians continue to die in Syria and in the Mediterranean, many of them children. The images of their bodies no longer cause a stir. They barely even make it into the news. It is early February 2016 and the world wishes the war in Syria would simply go away. The new round of peace talks in Geneva is aimed at making that happen.

According to the framework agreed upon in Vienna last November, the negotiations in Geneva will lead to a ceasefire and a national transitional government by mid-2016. By the end of 2017 the Syrian people will vote on a new constitution and a new president. By then the first refugees will have returned home and plans for rebuilding the country will be on the table.

Some may call this schedule overly optimistic, but the timeframe is not the main problem. The events on the ground in Syria are threatening this new peace process before it has even begun.

The terror attacks by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Paris last November lent diplomatic efforts a new urgency and an initial sense of optimism. All foreign governments intervening in Syria finally seemed to realize that battling the IS is futile as long as the war between the Syrian regime and anti-Assad rebel groups continues.

In Vienna, Iran was at last allowed to the negotiating table, while the US finally granted Vladimir Putin what he had craved: America's acknowledgment that Russia is not a "regional power," as US President Barack Obama once condescendingly called it, but a geo-strategic heavyweight currently ruling the airspace over Syria. In turn, Russia signaled that it could imagine a Syria without Bashar al-Assad, possibly by 2017. Washington responded with a thumbs-up.

Saudi Arabia probably pulled off the biggest success in the run-up to Geneva. At a conference in Riyadh in December the Saudi government, with some help from Ankara, forced the notoriously divided Syrian opposition to agree on a negotiation committee and a list of basic goals, which is surprisingly free of Islamist zealotry. The main points are: the integrity of Syrian territory; preserving state institutions while reforming the military and the security apparatus; free and fair elections; a rejection of any form of terrorism and any presence of foreign fighters; and Assad's removal from power once the transitional process begins.

The fact that one of the most powerful rebel commanders, the Saudi-backed Zahran Alloush, signed on to the Riyadh agreement gave the negotiation committee some badly needed credibility among Syrians. It also provided the opportunity to draw a clearer line between Islamist forces that can be part of a political process and those that have and will have to be fought with military means, such as IS and the Nusra Front.

However, a few days after the Riyadh conference Alloush was killed by an airstrike, which apparently was carried out by Russian planes. Given his record of war crimes – though pale in comparison to that of the Syrian regime or IS – few tears were shed over his death. But the political message of that particular missile strike from then on dominated the preparation of the Geneva talks: Moscow wanted to define who represents the Syrian opposition in Geneva – not only through airstrikes, but also by introducing its own "opposition delegation."

The "Russian list" includes names deemed acceptable by the Assad regime, hence disqualifying them in the eyes of the majority of Syrians. It also apparently includes the political leadership of the Syrian Kurds, who have proven to oversee effective ground troops against IS. Because they are the Syrian outfit of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK, Ankara had blocked their inclusion in the "Riyadh list." Syrian civil society, on the other hand, has had no real voice in any negotiation process up to now. Its members, who run local councils, schools and hospitals in cities and villages outside the control of the regime or IS, and who document crimes by all armed parties, have been systematically shut out.

Once optimistic: US Secretary of State John Kerry and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura at the Syria conference in Vienna on Nov. 14. As of Feb. 3, the Syria peace talks have been "temporarily paused."

PICTURE ALLIANCE/HANS PUNZ

So it comes as no surprise that the initial sense of optimism quickly evaporated. As this article goes to print, Geneva III, which had already been rhetorically demoted to "proximity talks," has been suspended after only two days until the end of February. The UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura had successfully defused the arguments about who would participate. But the relentless onslaught of Russian airplanes and pro-Assad troops on the ground in Syria, along with the continuation of sieges and barrel bombing against civilian areas, have rendered obsolete any chances for talks. It confirmed the opposition's fears that this round of talks will play out as simply the diplomatic stage of Russia's Syria script: Help the Syrian army and its Lebanese and Iranian allies regain as much opposition territory as possible while at the same time push for a political "transition" that will keep the Alawite security apparatus in power. It is a script that Western countries appear to have accepted. While Western governments insist that IS in Iraq can only be defeated if the Sunni population is given adequate political representation, no such reasoning applies in Syria.

Even the concession of Assad at some point stepping aside seems to be off the table for now. According to a recent report in the *Financial Times*, Assad reacted with an angry "No way!" when a high-ranking envoy of Putin tried to convince him in December that his days as president should come to an end. De Mistura bravely insists that the "proximity talks" have not failed and will resume, but this seems highly unlikely.

It may be useful to remember what is at stake; in the fifth year of the war the statistics of suffering in Syria have numbed the international community: more than 250,000 people killed; half of the population either internally displaced or forced to flee the country; more than 16 million in need of humanitarian assistance; about half a million besieged, mostly by pro-regime forces, but also by rebel groups; cities barrel-bombed by Assad's airplanes on a daily basis; Raqqa currently being terrorized by IS; chemical weapons still being used by the regime as well as IS.

But not only is a whole country being destroyed. The war in Syria and the international community's inability to end or at least suspend it has shredded decades of progress in humanitarian law. The UN Security Council has regressed to its worst levels of ideological trench-digging since the Cold War. And the EU has shifted into full panic mode in the face of its refugee crisis. Above all of this hovers the threat of another Paris-style terror attack.

Against this background it was tempting to stem the tide of bad news with reports of progress in Geneva. Both Washington and Moscow have invested too much diplomatic capital to let the process falter before it has even begun. US Secretary of State John Kerry had all but dragged the opposition's delegation to the table despite its repeated precondition that the shelling and sieges of civilians stop.

But keeping up appearances will be no substitute for substance. The flow of refugees will only continue if the barrel-bomb attacks, sieges and shelling proceed and corridors for humanitarian aid are not established. Western countries, but above all Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, have the leverage to restrain all anti-Assad forces that want to be part of the negotiating process. But the Syrian regime is by far the biggest perpetrator of crimes against its own population.

Russia and Iran have the leverage to restrain Assad, which would require considerable self-restraint. According to Syrian and international human rights organizations, Russian airstrikes have targeted hospitals, schools and rescue workers in territory controlled by opposition forces. More than 1,000 civilians have been killed by Russian bombs and missiles since the beginning of Moscow's intervention.

For the time being the new round of talks in Geneva have become another "toxic icing on a half-baked diplomatic cake," as Frederic C. Hof, Barack Obama's former Syria advisor, described Geneva II. Unless Putin realizes that he needs more than just the semblance of a political process, and that his intervention might well experience mission creep, the war will go on. This may be in Moscow's short-term interest. Should the talks indeed resume by the end of February, the regime could be in a position to not have to compromise on anything. And Syrians will continue fleeing to Europe. ■

Syria talks verbatim

At their meeting in Vienna on Oct. 30, 2015, the participants agreed on the following final declaration with the goal of bringing about an end to the violence as soon as possible:

1. Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character are fundamental.
2. State institutions will remain intact.
3. The rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, must be protected.
4. It is imperative to accelerate all diplomatic efforts to end the war.
5. Humanitarian access will be ensured throughout the territory of Syria, and the participants will increase support for internally displaced persons, refugees and their host countries.
6. Daesh and other terrorist groups – as designated by the UN Security Council, and further, as agreed by the participants – must be defeated.
7. Pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council Resolution 2118, the participants invited the UN to convene representatives of the Government of Syria and the Syrian opposition for a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections. These elections must be administered under UN supervision to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability. They must also be free and fair, with all Syrians, including the diaspora, eligible to participate.
8. This political process will be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, and the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria.
9. The participants, together with the United Nations, will explore modalities for, and the implementation of, a nationwide ceasefire to be initiated on a certain date and in parallel with this renewed political process.

Andrea Böhm, based in Beirut, is Middle East correspondent of the German weekly Die Zeit.

Kurds vs. Kurds

Rivalry between the Syrian arm of the PKK and the Kurdish autonomous government in Erbil is undermining the fight against IS | By Markus Bickel

US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter prophesied in mid-January that the self-proclaimed Islamic State's hold on the northern Iraqi city of Mosul would soon be broken and that preparations were under way for an advance on Raqqa in Syria, with US special forces on the verge of deployment to support local militias.

Troops answering to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have controlled Raqqa for nearly three years. Re-taking the city on the Euphrates could be the beginning of the end of IS rule over large tracts of northern Syria.

The key to military success in both Syria and Iraq appears to be Kurdish forces. Without the support of the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – which now control hundreds of kilometers along the southern border of Turkey – as well as help from the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga, it will not be possible to drive IS out of its proto-capitals. Carter pointed out that the aim was not to form new divisions – rather, it was to strengthen America's local allies: "That means that a few key leaders and key individuals are trained to a very high, exquisite level so that they can be enablers for the entire unit."

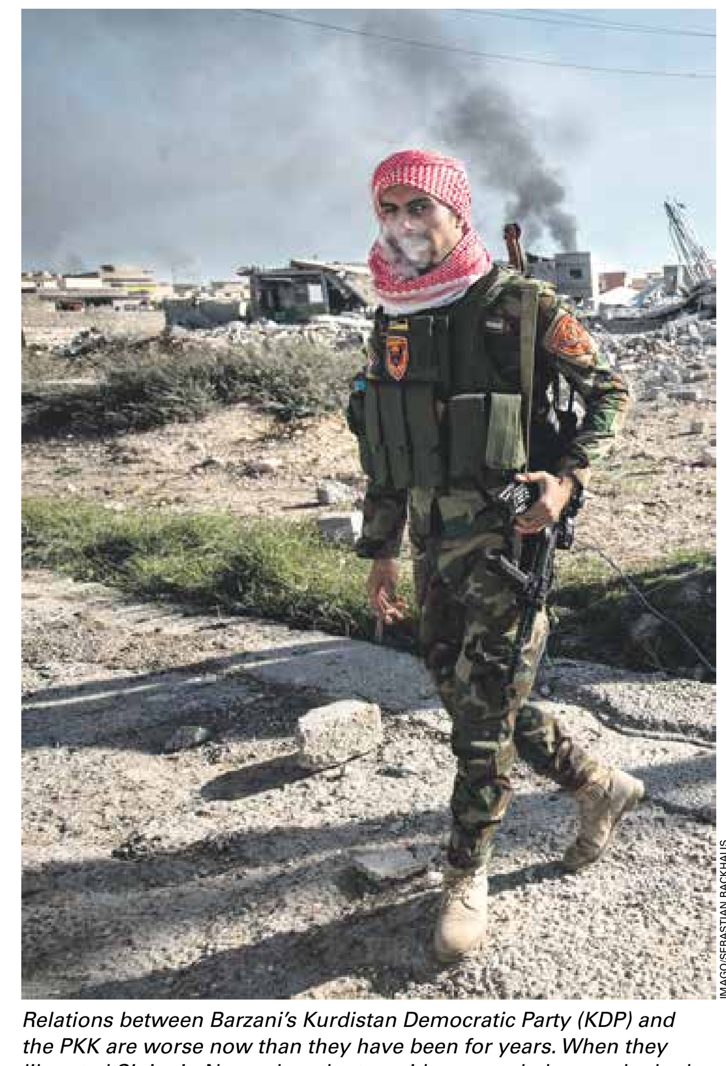
On the Syrian-Kurdish front, as on the hard-fought border between the Iraqi part of Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi's caliphate and the autonomous Kurdish region run by President Masoud Barzani, this strategy appears to be working. His Peshmerga forces are barely more than 30 kilometers from Mosul, the capital of Nineveh Province. Peshmerga units, armed with MILAN anti-tank missiles and M-36 assault rifles provided by the German army, have advanced this far since the successful campaigns by IS in mid-2014; in November they conquered what was until recently a center of Yazidi society, the Sinjar Mountains west of Mosul.

Politicians from countries in the US-led anti-IS alliance saw the retaking of the strategically important mountains in the Syrian-Iraqi border region as a sign that Iraq's second-biggest city would soon be liberated. But officials in Erbil continue to warn that any offensive on Mosul would have to be organized by the central government in Baghdad. The main attack would have to be conducted by government troops coming from the south, Kurdish officials say – and Pentagon boss Carter agrees. However, the areas to the south of Mosul remain under IS control.

So it could be 2017 before any attack is launched on Mosul. The Iraqi army is weak – it only just managed to free the western Iraqi provincial capital of Ramadi from IS – and then only with massive destruction. Kurdish troops marching into Mosul – whose inhabitants are mostly Sunni Arabs – would also increase the ethnic tensions already threatening to tear the Iraqi state apart.

A further problem is that Turkey is also involved in training Peshmerga fighters. In late 2015 that caused an outrage in Baghdad, where it was regarded as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty; Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called on the UN Security Council.

One victory in the war against IS does not take Iraq any closer to national unity. On the contrary – there are too many forces with diverging interests on both sides of the border, which itself is a product of the colonial era and was drawn up one hundred years ago in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The border runs right through the middle of the IS caliphate. And the proxy war being fought between Iran and the US ever since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq is now being fought in Syria as well. Once more, the Kurdish forces don't fit with either side. They are led by the YPG on the ground and are represented politically by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) led by Saleh Muslim. The party has neither positioned itself clearly on the side of the Sunni-dominated opposition, nor fully broken with the regime of Bashar al-Assad.



Relations between Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PKK are worse now than they have been for years. When they liberated Sinjar in November, the two sides quarreled over who had played a greater role in the battle.

IMAGO/SEBASTIAN BACKHAUS

Any solution to the conflict is additionally complicated by Russia's entry into the war last September – something Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is bitterly opposed to. The YPG is one of the groups benefiting from Russian airstrikes on Islamist positions in the provinces bordering Turkey. The advance they began in December from Kobanî westwards brings a contiguous Kurdish region within the realm of possibility. For this reason, too, US military support for the YPG is a thorn in Turkey's side.

That also explains Erdogan's strategic partnership with the president of Iraq's Kurdish region, Masoud Barzani. Unlike in northern Syria, where the Turkish president fears the PYD autonomous region of Rojava could become the core of an independent Kurdish state, Erdogan supports the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq (KRG) with all his might. Fighters from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are holed up in the Qandil Mountains on the edge of the Iraqi Kurdish region. They have been the focus of renewed airstrikes by Turkey since the middle of last year.

Barzani gave Erdogan the green light for the military strikes, a move very much against Washington's will, as President Barack Obama sees the YPG People's Defense Units – the Syrian arm of the PKK – as the most important ground forces against IS after the Peshmerga.

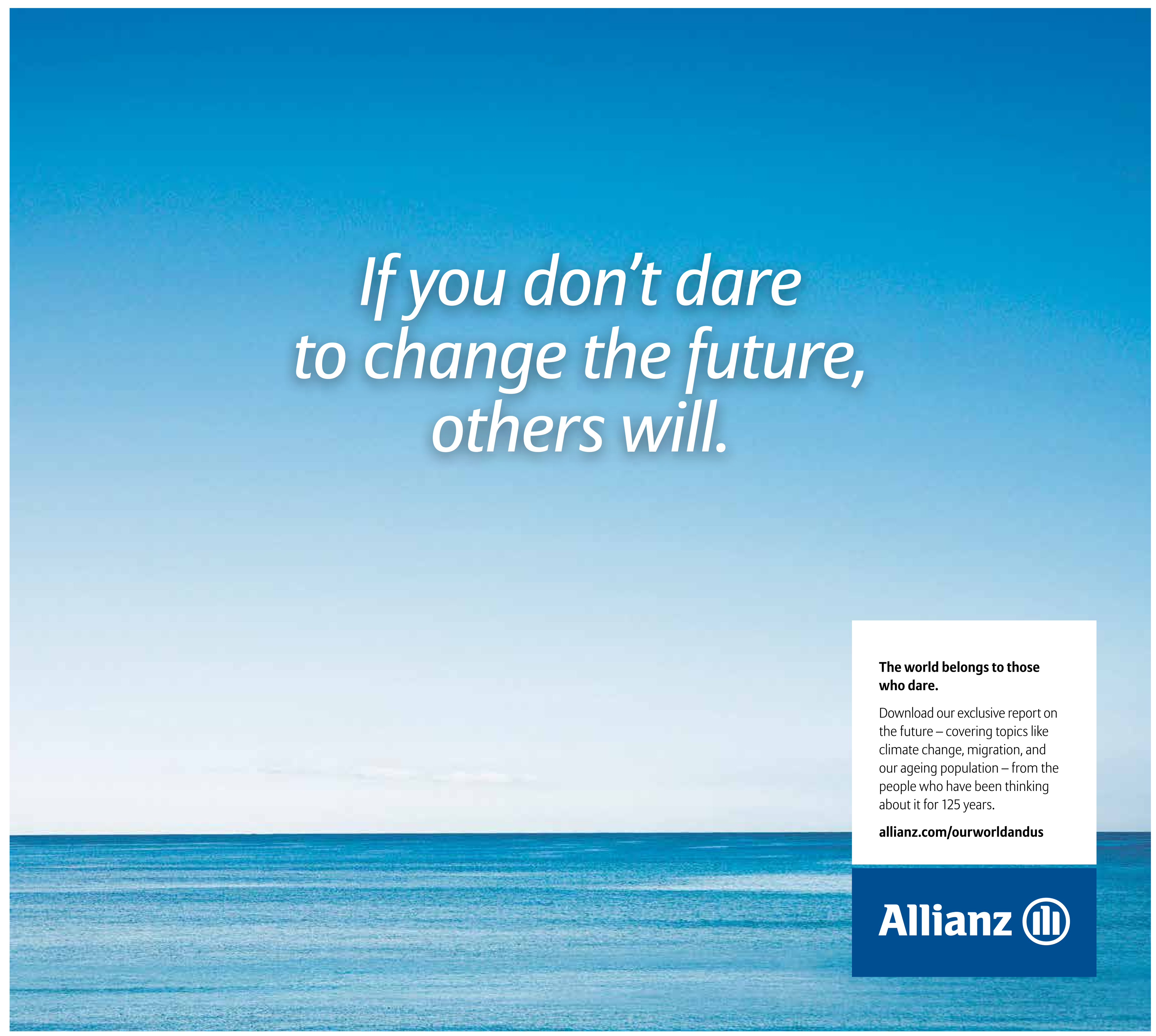
With the help of US airstrikes, YPG fighters have even been able to drive IS out of some of its positions along the Euphrates and to re-take the Tishrin Dam. And with the liberation of Monbij near the Turkish border, they interdicted one of the supply lines via which the Islamist militants obtained supplies from Turkey until the end of 2015. In the middle of 2015, the YPG took back the border town of Tell Abyad, drawing sharp criticism from Ankara; the Turkish government accused YPG units of carrying out ethnic cleansing against the Arab and Turkmen populations in the region. In mid-January, Amnesty International accused Barzani's government of destroying thousands of homes of Arab former inhabitants in the areas it liberated from IS.

After being all too friendly towards the terrorist movement, Turkey is now coming down harder on IS – after IS terrorists carried out bombings with many casualties in Ankara in October and in Istanbul in January. But for Erdogan, more important than hitting IS is preventing a Kurdish-controlled territory on Turkey's southern flank, stretching from Qamishli close to the Iraqi border, almost to Aleppo in northwestern Syria. Once a key trade center in Syria, Aleppo is now regarded by Ankara as part of its sphere of influence.

Gone are the days in which Erdogan allowed Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga units to cross Turkish territory to help the YPG fighters encircled by IS in Kobanî. Twelve months later, each side is eyeing the other distrustfully; the brief historic alliance among Kurds is already history. Relations between Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PKK are worse now than they have been for years. When they liberated Sinjar in November, the two sides quarreled over who had played a greater role in the battle.

Rivalry between the Kurdish groups may yet cause problems for the anti-IS alliance, as the Sinjar Mountains are of strategic importance for both Iraq and Syria. The oil-rich districts of Syria's Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor provinces can be reached from there just as easily as from the lands west of Mosul – still controlled by IS. ■

Markus Bickel is the Cairo correspondent of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and the author of "Der vergessene Nahostkonflikt" (The Forgotten Conflict in the Middle East, 2011).



Game of thrones

Europe needs security arrangements that take Moscow's legitimate interests into account without relegating certain NATO and EU aspirants to a permanent zone of limited sovereignty | By Michael Rühle

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its ongoing undeclared war with Ukraine have created a radically new situation for NATO. Two major premises upon which the alliance's post-Cold War reform was based – that Russia's evolution would remain benign and the enlargement of Western institutions could be reconciled with Russia's interests – no longer apply.

Russia's intervention does not necessarily amount to a direct threat to NATO. However, if Ukraine's wish to associate itself with the European Union is already a casus belli for Moscow, the security of Europe's post-Cold War order, which includes the right of countries to freely choose their alignments, has experienced a major setback.

Worse, with its military intervention in Syria, Russia has now become part of the IS conundrum at NATO's southeastern borders. The West, notably the United States, has been forced to realize that any vacuum it allows to develop in the Middle East will be filled by other actors.

These developments have sparked NATO's largest political and military reorientation since the end of the Cold War. But the Allies must also consider the policy they want to pursue towards Russia. As Russia will be an important factor in shaping political and military developments in both the eastern and southern reaches of NATO, allies must do more than simply lament the failure of earlier hopes for a stable European order.

NATO's initial reaction to the Russia-Ukraine crisis was swift and clear: it increased its military presence and activities in the east. However, transforming these initial reflexes into a posture that is both militarily coherent and politically acceptable will be more demanding.

This has already become evident with regard to the centerpiece of NATO's military response, the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), which emphasizes the rapid delivery of reinforcements to Central and Eastern Europe. RAP is designed to remain compliant with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, whereby NATO will not deploy substantial combat forces or nuclear weapons on the territory of its new members.

While it can be argued that Russia's behavior has pulled the rug out from under these assurances, NATO has thus far sought to avoid irreversible steps that could undermine a new rapprochement with Russia. To put it bluntly, RAP was meant to assure Russia as much as NATO's eastern allies.

However, given the steady improvement of Russia's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, such as the deployment of modern air defense and anti-ship missiles in Kaliningrad, some are calling for a shift from "reassurance" to "deterrence." They envisage a posture focused less on reinforcements and more on standing, in-theater military capabilities. This should deny Russia the opportunity to use its regional military superiority to create a fait accompli, for example through a limited incursion into a Baltic State.

NATO need not hold changes to its strategy or posture hostage to Russian (mis)perceptions; however, it must carefully ponder the messages such a shift would send to Russia as well as to its member states. What may deter Russia may not necessarily reassure all NATO states. Thus, while NATO's reinforcement paradigm is likely to be augmented by equipment pre-positioning or similar measures, it is unlikely to morph into posturing reminiscent of the Cold War's substantial military deployments.

A similar logic pertains to the nuclear dimension of deterrence. Russia's nuclear saber-rattling has provided a new rationale for nuclear deterrence as a basis of defense, but any revisiting of NATO's nuclear policy will not result in a mirroring of Russian doctrinal and rhetorical excesses. Here, too, reassuring NATO's own members is as important as deterring Russia.

IMAGO/THOMAS EISENHUTH

How to play the Ukraine card? The board game Risk *was originally released in 1957 and has been reissued many times. It allows for all kinds of strategic alliances and unofficial treaties.*

NATO's southern states, where security is determined less by Russia than by instability in North Africa and the Middle East, must also be reassured that NATO remains their best insurance policy. While southern member states have less specific defense requirements than those in the east, their concern about a perceived overemphasis of NATO's eastern dimension is palpable. For NATO to avoid a bifurcation into two regional groupings with different security concerns, it must maintain its ability to conduct expeditionary missions in full, whenever and wherever necessary. The fight by many member states against IS demonstrates as much.

The debate in Europe over the flow of refugees from the Middle East has further bolstered the rationale for addressing the crisis in the region. While the Russia challenge is mainly a matter of deterrence, IS is an immediate threat requiring an immediate military response.

Adapting NATO's military posture is a major challenge, yet developing a new policy towards Russia will be equally difficult; not only have various member states traditionally held different views on Russia, but Russia itself has changed in such a way that a reliable analysis is both necessary and daunting.

Most observers agree that Putin's 2012 return to the office of president has shifted the issue of maintaining power to center stage. Russia's military doctrine strongly reflects the fear of "color revolutions" like those in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as the Arab Spring.

Putin's aim is thus not an elusive reconstruction of the Soviet Union, but rather to maintain the regime and prevent any further waning of Russia's political clout. With Russia's territorial amputations in countries it considers to be within its traditional sphere of influence, Moscow is creating a string of "frozen conflicts" to prevent these countries from joining Western institutions.

At the same time, Russia is propping up Syria, its last ally in the Middle East. Whether it's improvised activism or part of a master plan, most observers agree that this policy is here to stay.

Given this backdrop, attempts to resurrect the overhyped NATO-Russia Strategic Partnership seems futile. However, notions that NATO could remain in wait-and-see mode or that it must build up more military muscle before engaging Russia in a new dialogue are equally shortsighted. Russia's permanent seat on the UN Security Council gives it veto power over NATO-led operations of a nature considered beyond collective defense – a fact that calls for at least some sort of dialogue. The same goes for the need to reduce the risk of military incident.

However, an even more important reason for engagement is the unresolved issue of Russia's future role in European security. The current focus on military balances obscures the fact that the real issue at stake is a geopolitical one: Russia's place in Europe. The West's twin strategy of enlarging NATO and the EU while forging an ever-closer relationship with Russia was contingent on a cooperative environment, i.e. on Russia's acquiescence. Now that Russia has demonstrated that it will violently oppose the further expansion of NATO and the EU into its sphere of interest, the game has changed.

Convincing Russia of the benign nature of NATO and EU enlargement appears a lost cause. Europe needs security arrangements that take legitimate Russian interests into account without relegating certain NATO and EU aspirants to a permanent zone of limited sovereignty. Developing such arrangements will be difficult, particularly as Russia's behavior has all but destroyed its credibility as a guarantor of agreed norms. For the tragedy of a wayward Russia not to become a tragedy for all of Europe, the previous focus on institutions and memberships must be supplemented by policies prioritizing functional cooperation over formal affiliation. More years of hard work are still required for Europe to become truly "whole and free." ■

Michael Rühle heads the Energy Security Section in NATO's Emerging Security Challenges Division. The opinions he expresses are solely his own.

Russia's Syria gambit

Putin's overriding goal in the Levant is not defeating terrorism, but elevating Russia's place in the world order | By Dmitri Trenin

Four-plus months into Russia's military operations in Syria, it is time to look at the results it has produced thus far, the objectives Moscow pursues and the risks that are involved.

The Kremlin's rationale for going in was rather straightforward. No government takes lightly the decision to put military forces in harm's way. Those who argue that President Vladimir Putin went into Syria to replace on Russian TV screens the picture of a stalemate in Donbass with one of Russian Air Force prowess in the skies over Syria should know better. The first thought average Russians had upon hearing of their country's involvement in Syria was "Afghanistan." Such a move is far less likely to win political capital than to spend it.

Russian airpower was deployed to Syria after Moscow had concluded that the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's military was imminent. If allowed to happen, that would have almost inevitably led to the takeover of Damascus by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). Such a triumph would have greatly enhanced the extremists' appeal not only in the Middle East, but across the entire Muslim world. Putin, thinking he both could and had to prevent it, proceeded to order Russia's first-ever offensive military operation in an Arab country. The immediate objective of the intervention has been reached. With Russia's support in the air, Assad's military was able to stabilize the situation on the battlefield and gain some ground, at the expense of other jihadi groups more than of IS itself.

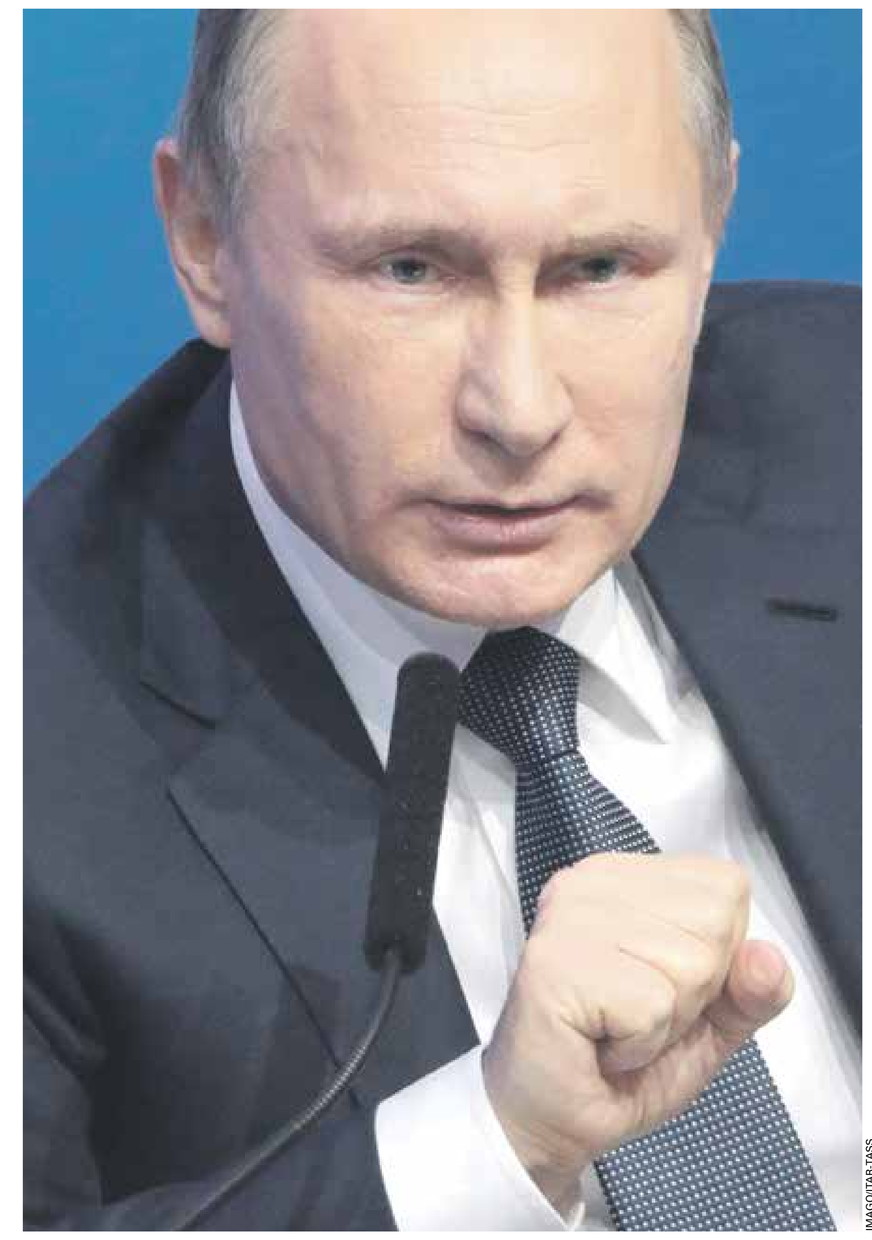
Putin's longer-term objective was to have as many jihadists killed in Syria as possible, particularly those hailing from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. Russian forces intervened in the Middle East to avoid having to fight at home. It is still too early to assess the success of this strategy. A month into the Syria campaign, terrorists bombed a Russian passenger plane over Sinai, causing 224 deaths; and on New Year's Eve an IS-affiliated group attacked Russian servicemen on a tour of the ancient fortress in Dagestan.

Yet it is not a given that if Russia had not intervened in Syria, its citizens would have been spared. Terrorism has been a threat to Russians for over two decades, but Moscow has only now gone abroad to address the problem militarily at its source.

Yet, Putin's overriding goal in the Syrian war is not Syria, or even defeating terrorism, but changing the world order, and elevating Russia's position within it. The Russian leader had consistently aimed at a sustainable arrangement in which all major global security decisions would be made by a committee of more or less co-equal great powers, with Russia as a permanent member of the group.

In Putin's view such an arrangement cannot simply be granted, or even amicably agreed. One must fight for it, sometimes literally so. By inserting the Russian military into the Syrian conflict, Putin has sought to impose Russia on the United States as a major independent party in the fight against IS, and to bolster Russia's credentials as a co-chair of the Vienna peace process.

Within a few months after the fact, Russia has become an indispensable power in matters of war and peace in Syria. Putin's offer to Washington, first made in 2013, to engineer a peace settlement in Syria brokered by Russia and the US – a sort of "Dayton-à-deux" for the Middle East – has finally found takers in the Obama administration. If successful, the military-diplomatic gambit in Syria would give the Kremlin what it craves most in the international arena: America's recognition of Russia's role as a great power in the post-Cold War world.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Towards a new world order: Vladimir Putin.

This result is of course anything but assured, and the gambit itself is not without risks. The Middle East is not only a graveyard of historical empires; more recently it has been littered with the debris of numerous peace efforts. On the political front, Russia faces huge difficulties with the notoriously fractured Syrian opposition, much of which is hostile to Moscow – as a result of recent Russian bombardments – and overly dependent on outside sponsors. Nor is Russia having a particularly easy time with its nominal ally, Bashar al-Assad. Having saved his regime with its airstrikes, Moscow feels positioned to demand more flexibility from Damascus, but Assad is not always amenable, and often requires Putin to perform heavy lifting to get what he wants.

Putin has also faced difficulties from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who are eager for the end of the Assad regime. The Kremlin leader was unpleasantly surprised by Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, a long-time partner who ordered the downing of a Russian warplane near the Turkish-Syrian border. The two men killed in the incident remain the only Russian military casualties of the Syria campaign. The Russo-Turkish relationship, strategically important and economically productive, has suffered a serious blow. Moscow has also had to downplay the image of Russia siding with the Shia regimes in Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus in a region bitterly divided between the minority Shia and the majority Sunni sects. The combined effect of these factors places huge demands on Russian diplomacy.

The Russian military intervention in Syria has thus far paid off, but the future remains unclear. In response to a question at a press conference last December, Putin suggested that Russia would find it easy to withdraw from Syria once its mission there is accomplished. Accomplishing its mission, however, would require a successful completion of the Vienna process and some sort of breakthrough in the fight against IS in Syria. Neither looks imminent at the moment. Even if the mission is accomplished, it is unlikely that Russia, which aspires to a major global role, would vacate a position it has won in the heart of the Middle East.

Russia, meanwhile, would need to prosecute its first "US-style" war, in which the Air Force and Navy engage the enemy with often spectacular strikes while suffering no combat casualties. Above all, Vladimir Putin would need to ensure that the intervention he has ordered does not escalate toward a more traditional military engagement, with Russian ground troops and the inevitable casualties drawing disturbing parallels with the failed Soviet intervention in Afghanistan three decades ago. ■

Dmitri Trenin is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Joining up: Will he help make NATO troops expendable in the near future? An Afghan army soldier holds his certificate during a graduation ceremony in Kabul on Jan. 17, 2016. The Afghan national army welcomed 1,400 new soldiers that day after their four-month training course.

IMAGO/XINHUA

Mission not accomplished

The Taliban's temporary conquest of Kunduz made plain the Afghan army's continuing need for training and outside expertise | By Johannes Leithäuser

By now the international military deployment in Afghanistan was supposed to have pretty much wrapped up. For 2016, according to the original planning, the NATO-led mission "Resolute Support" would still have a troop presence only in Kabul. The regional deployment centers, or "spokes," in Afghanistan's north (Mazar-I-Sharif), east (Bagram), south (Kandahar) and west (Herat) would no longer exist.

Instead, NATO and its partner states have postponed – indefinitely – their complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. Germany's parliament actually voted in December to modestly expand the contingent of German troops there by 130 soldiers to 980.

The NATO governments, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition parties and part of the opposition Greens, view this as a strategic correction made just in time. The defense ministry in Berlin argues that the original withdrawal plan depended not only – and not even primarily – on the country's security situation, but on other data as well. This foggy justification chiefly conceals a schedule dictated by the US presidential election. It was a requirement from the White House that the international successor mission to the ISAF deployment be wound up in late 2016, so that the "Mission accomplished!" announcement could be made by Election Day in November.

Yet these plans were upended in northern Afghanistan, in the city of Kunduz, under the Bundeswehr's regional command based in Mazar-I-Sharif, and where Germany's operational commitment in the form of the Kunduz "Regional Reconstruction Team" began more than a decade ago. The Bundeswehr evacuated Kunduz in 2013 and pulled back to its base in Mazar-I-Sharif. Soon, reports started coming in that the Afghan forces – the armed forces, the quasi-military National Police and local police units – had lost control over parts of the province, although Afghanistan had assumed "full security responsibility." Last October, in a brazen operation, several hundred Taliban fighters stormed the city. This surprised an Afghan army that had neither been monitoring for signs of an imminent attack nor was able to mount any effective, immediate resistance because of a holiday weekend.

The shock waves from Kunduz changed minds rapidly. Within days, German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen signaled willingness to extend her country's presence in Afghanistan. Following a similar process in Washington, NATO ministers adjusted their policy in December. The departure from the "spoke" bases was made contingent on the situation's development and the Afghan army's abilities. The ministers ruled out a return to direct combat support for the Afghans by international troops, excepting special bilateral agreements that the Americans had made with the Afghans. These have to do with the provision of air support using warplanes and special forces.

That NATO decided, without disputes or long debates, to extend "Resolute Support" with an unchanged mandate, i.e. as a pure training and advisory mission, probably also had to do with what Bundeswehr advisors witnessed during the re-conquest of Kunduz. It took place over the course of November and without large-scale casualties for the Afghan security forces, bearing witness to their valor, but also to the tactical advice from NATO offices.

The Bundeswehr drew several conclusions from the Kunduz episode. It illustrated continuing deficits in the Afghan forces' equipment and conduct, highlighted where strategic and tactical advice was still needed, but also provided evidence of what the Afghan security forces were capable of.

The fundamental problems the Bundeswehr observed among the Afghan forces in the country's north include many deficits a recent NATO report identified in the Afghan army as a whole. It states that, of the approximately 100 battalions ("Kandaks") nearly half were only partially or not at all operational. One main reason, it found, was a high rate of turnover within the ranks – something German advisors have confirmed. They observed that the army loses about a third of its 200,000 personnel every year, a gap that must be constantly filled by new recruits who must also be trained anew.

In 2013, the first year the Afghan forces conducted the fight against the Taliban largely without Western help on the ground, they reported more than 4,000 soldiers killed. Since then, even higher. Many of the soldiers released by their units before winter do not return to their bases come spring. One reason is the relatively low pay for the junior ranks. The Taliban, and even more so the IS militia, pay their fighters much higher wages.

The Bundeswehr, which holds the regional command in Mazar-I-Sharif and operates the Camp Marmal base there with 20 partner nations (which include many NATO states as well as countries like Georgia and Mongolia), sends more than 50 advisors every day to the neighboring Afghan military installation, the base of the 209th ANA Corps. The German commander, Brigadier General Andreas Hannemann, who led the base from February to December of 2015, compiled a list of the Afghan Army's deficiencies at the end of the year. He found capabilities still lacking in terms of the recognition and detection of explosive traps, joint weapons operations, i.e. combining infantry, armored vehicles and artillery, as well as reconnaissance and airborne fire support. Airborne capabilities will improve during 2016, say sources in the German regional command. That would complete a first step in the building up of the Afghan Air Force.

In describing the military situation in Afghanistan, a senior German general recently used the term "bloody stalemate." The current assessment is that, following the end of the ISAF combat mission, Taliban radical Islamists tried everything they could last year to demonstrate their own military power. In the battle for Kunduz, attacks in Kabul and an assault on the airport in Kandahar, they succeeded in doing so. However, the analysis shows they have not achieved any lasting victories. During its counterattack to liberate Kunduz, the Afghan army even retook areas that had been under Taliban control for years.

The German presence in Mazar-I-Sharif is no longer bound to a timetable. The originally planned rapid withdrawal of NATO from the various regions of Afghanistan is now regarded as a mistake. In place of rigid schedules, milestones have become the alliance's new reference points for how long its training and advisory mission remains necessary in Afghanistan. Camp Marmal, which once accommodated up to 7,000 ISAF troops, will remain the stationing area for 1,500 soldiers for at least the current year, with the Germans supplying, in addition to military advisors and part of the staff, most of the logistics as well as medical evacuation capacity with helicopters.

The advisors insist that the NATO-led mission will succeed in helping make Afghanistan's security forces more effective this year. But Berlin's defense ministry also points out that military means can only gain time for reaching a political resolution for Afghanistan's future and a settlement with the Taliban.

The Afghan government under President Ashraf Ghani and "Chief Executive Officer" Abdullah Abdullah lost a great deal of time last year. However, when asked whether the military engagement of the Western world has been an overall success or failure, the German Defense Ministry tends to include statistics in its responses: Between 2001 and 2015 the total length of paved roads in Afghanistan rose from 60 to 12,300 kilometers, the number of teachers from 20,000 to 186,000, the literacy rate from 12 to 39 percent and annual per capita gross national product from $186 to $688. ■

Giving up: Taliban fighters attend a surrender ceremony in Mazar-I-Sharif on Jan. 18, 2016.

MAGO/XINHUA

Johannes Leithäuser is the political correspondent for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in Berlin.

The bleakest possible picture

The Munich Security Conference revealed the wide chasm between Russia and the West

Wolfgang Ischinger sent the visitors of the Munich Security Conference home with his wish that they bear not the image of a "continuation of the bleakest possible picture," but rather one with "a glimmer of hope." A few hours earlier he had made his point clear; to those who had the feeling that this conference delivered nothing but bad news, he countered: "I attended some meetings where the tone and direction were much less confrontational."

But the debates in Munich laid bare the multiple failures of conflict resolution and prevention. Security and cooperation in Europe are in sorry shape. Where there was once an Iron Curtain, a wide chasm now separates Russia and the West. Deep disagreements and manifold misinterpretations persist, above all in defining and combating terrorists in Syria and regarding the question of Ukraine; in the corridors of Hotel Bayerischer Hof, the talk was repeatedly of lost trust, and even mutual suspicion.

Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko aired one misinterpretation: "Mr. Putin, this is not a civil war in Ukraine, this is your aggression." His Polish counterpart, Andrzej Duda, voiced mistrust concerning imprecisely formulated "Russian ambitions." Lithuania's Dalia Grybauskaitė perceived no great difference between Russia's bombardments of Aleppo and IS terrorism. German Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen offered: "It was unbearable how the people in Aleppo were covered with a carpet of bombs while, at the same time, trust was supposed to be built in the Vienna talks." As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg summed it up: "Russia is destabilizing the European security order."

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev was defiant: "We are rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war," he said. "Russia has been presented as well-nigh the biggest threat to NATO." And later: "Is this 2016 or 1962?"

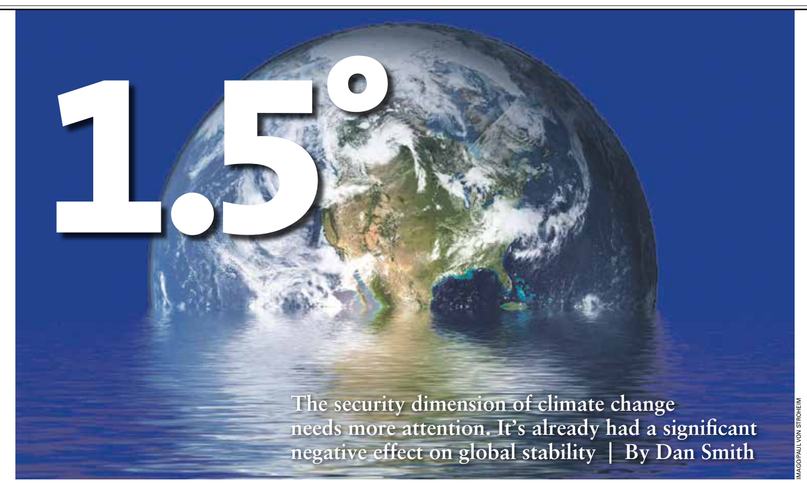
Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov would also complain of a "tendency for Russophobia in certain countries." He went on to explain that "today, the level of interaction between Euro-Atlantic organizations and Russia in certain spheres is even lower than during the Cold War period."

But even the EU is discordant, particularly due to the refugee distribution crisis. In Munich, Prime Minister Manuel Valls of France laid out the limits of French tolerance: his country will accept no more than 30,000 refugees. In the past year, Germany took in more than one million refugees. The number of allies on whom she can still rely is shrinking fast.

The solid reasoning of the German delegation fell on deaf ears. Defense Minister von der Leyen cannot understand why 1.5 to 2 million refugees should pose a threat to an EU comprising 500 million people. This crisis is "moral in nature; the solidarity among EU member states is threatening to erode. The future Europe promised over the past 70 years, as the model for freedom and common values, threatens to be consumed by xenophobia and nationalism." If the Europeans find no solution, "we are shifting the dilemma to countries with external borders: security or human rights! That is a betrayal of European values."

Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, said: "Desolidarization is the biggest crisis in the EU. We are wiping out our common agreements." Chief of the German Chancellery Peter Altmeier exclaimed: "Locking doors is not the solution," and later, "we will not accept national solutions." Wolfgang Ischinger admonished: "Renationalization will make things worse, not better. We need more EU, full stop." Fear has never been a good advisor, he added.

US Secretary of State John Kerry listed off all the crises, but then offered: "I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever we're going to get this right, we're going to get through this moment, and we're going to build the prosperity and the security and the stability that every single one of us wants. We are going to do just fine." *PHK*



IMAGO/PAUL VON STROHEIM

The security dimension of climate change needs more attention. It's already had a significant negative effect on global stability | By Dan Smith

The security dimension of the challenge from climate change is unavoidable yet seems to be easily ignored. Failure to address this problem will render the security agenda unmanageable within 30 to 40 years.

2015 was the year of climate change. With the Paris Agreement, world politics crossed a threshold thanks to high levels of clarity and commitment. But the problem cannot be resolved in one go and, among other challenges, the security dimension needs close attention.

In April 2015 the foreign ministers of the G7 welcomed the findings of an independent report commissioned by the group's members. Titled "A New Climate for Peace," the report addresses how climate change combines with other challenges to jeopardize security, especially in fragile states. But this high-level awareness remains largely abstract and diffuse; there has been little practical action.

The Paris Agreement signed in December by COP 21 (21st Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) goes further than previous treaties: it enjoys the agreement of more states; its goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C (compared to pre-industrial figures) is more ambitious than the previous goal of 2°; the text creates a firm link between reducing emissions, building resilience and supporting technological innovation; although much of it is non-binding, the agreement does bind each party to make plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to below current levels; and finally, it has an inbuilt self-improvement mechanism, committing the parties to making and implementing successive plans for reducing emissions, each more ambitious than the last.

This is a major achievement, yet the future of the security agenda is also shaped by the negative milestones of 2015. It was the warmest year ever – again. July was the warmest month in recorded history. The average global concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere exceeded 400 parts per million for the first time ever. The average global temperature is now 1°C warmer than in the pre-industrial age.

And it gets worse: a widely accepted estimate is that greenhouse gases, in addition to already having raised average world temperatures by 1°C, have amassed to such an extent that that an additional temperature increase of 0.6°C is unavoidable over the next four decades. Thus, even if there were to be no more greenhouse gas emissions as of today, global warming is certain to exceed the 1.5° threshold set in the Paris Agreement.

This is where potential chaos in the international security agenda may lie three or four decades from now.

The significance of the 1.5° level is that it is the estimated safe maximum for low-lying small island states and coastal areas. These regions face challenges to their essential viability – will it still be possible for people to live in these locations by mid-century? If not, where will they go? As conditions deteriorate, what will people demand of their states and how will states react? We know enough about the impact of climate variability to be able to discern some dark prospects.

The 2011 uprising in Egypt was driven in part by the rise in global food prices, which increased largely because of drought in China and forest fires in Russia the previous year. For a country like Egypt, where food prices are stabilized by government subsidies, it became impossible to prevent price increases, which large segments of the population could not afford. Anger over food prices intersected with and was compounded by anger over arbitrary and unaccountable authority with world-shaking results.

In Syria, before protests and the war began in 2011, there was a four-to-five year drought that drove at least a million people out of agricultural employment. They then migrated to the cities where many could barely survive. The government was unable and unwilling to address their deprivation. When protests started over lack of free speech and redoubled as authorities responded violently, there was a deep well of anger, resentment and despair. The protests fed off this widespread discontent and militias had no problems finding willing recruits. The tragic results are the destruction of Syria and the exacerbation of political stability and social well-being in the region and beyond.

These are but the two most visible cases. There are many other regions where the changing climate has had a significant negative effect on security and stability, including Mali, Thailand, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Darfur and, with more localized and less spectacular consequences, in pastoral areas of the Horn of Africa, in Nepal, Bangladesh, the Nile Basin, India and Mozambique. All are cited in last year's report to the G7.

In 2015 Europe underwent the largest flow of forced migration in decades and, in November, the terror attacks in Paris. It is helpful to consider that climate change played a role in each case. On the one hand, such consideration is certain to stimulate motivation to implement the Paris Agreement and to make the most of its self-improvement mechanism. On the other hand, we need to improve our handling of the consequences, regardless of how successful our actions are in addressing the causes.

It is perhaps an irony that, whereas in most cases one criticizes the focus on symptoms of insecurity and conflict at the expense of treating their causes, in this case it is the other way round: the focus on causes is fine, but if we fail to treat the symptoms, we are lost.

Addressing the symptoms – i.e. the consequences of climate change – will require newfound resilience. There appear to be five main routes to this end, none of which has a military component. The military dimension is a last resort that should be explored only if resilience cannot be established and communities or even whole societies become victim to the effects of climate change. This is a core area of security, but not in the first instance of defense policy or military strategy.

First, we must improve risk management. The initial step is to deepen risk assessment. The risks of today and tomorrow are complex products of the interaction of climate change, poor governance, conflict legacy, inequality and underdevelopment – in varying combinations with varying consequences. For example, communities relying on rain-fed agriculture or on irrigation face risks of diminished water supply, which leads to food insecurity.

However, evidence shows that while water scarcity in rain-fed agriculture (as in much of Africa) tends to lead to conflicts over land, water scarcity in irrigation-based agriculture (as in Central Asia) is more likely to lead to disputes over water sources. Understanding the different types of conflict risk allows for the development of variously calibrated short- and medium-term responses.

Three further priorities are enhancing food security, improving disaster risk readiness and ensuring that current agreements on managing trans-boundary water resources – the shared use of lakes and rivers – are strong enough to withstand fluctuations in water volumes. Finally, building resilience must be prioritized throughout development aid policy and projects. Resilience is not only or even primarily a matter of dams and seawalls. It is also a matter of how individuals and communities build their homes, where they build them, what they farm and how the rivers are used and protected. For the security of all, a priority development goal must henceforth be the resilience of all.

These approaches take security policy well beyond its traditional confines. Such is the nature of the challenge we face today if tomorrow's security agenda is to be at all manageable. ■

Dan Smith is director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). His latest publication is the atlas, "The State of the Middle East" (Penguin, New York; New Internationalist, Oxford, UK).

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