

## **Stefanie Babst: Eyes Wide Open** (OT: Sehenden Auges)

Sample Translation  
By Alice Thornton

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## **Blindness**

Bundestag, Berlin. 14<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

I have been sitting opposite members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs for two hours. I was invited alongside five other consultants to provide an assessment of the ‘EU Strategic Compass’ which will be adopted in a few weeks. The EU is then going to set out its defence priorities, describing how it intends to strengthen its meagre military capacity to act in the future.

I am trying to be patient. Three of the other consultants have been painting a rosy picture of the compass - even though one of them, by his own admission, has not even read it. This has not prevented him from speaking about it at length. The official line is that everything is on the right track.

I simply do not understand: Russian forces have been building up on the Ukrainian border for weeks now, but nobody here wants to address it. When I am finally called up by the chairman, I can barely breathe under my mask. More out of outrage than out of a real lack of air.

‘You’re all completely disconnected from reality,’ I bark at the MPs. ‘There’s going to be a war in Europe. Russia is about to attack Ukraine. The second largest country, in the centre of Europe. And that’s not even taking Russia’s nuclear power into account. How is Germany going to react? What is your plan?’

My questions hang in the air. Nobody answers. I continue: ‘A war in Europe instigated by Russia will lead to the collapse of European security and all of its current structures. It will have drastic consequences for us all. Other states are watching our reactions closely, especially China. What exactly do you think Putin and Xi Jinping were discussing when they met a few days ago on the side-lines of the Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing? Long jump? These two continental powers are armed to the teeth and have joined forces. This will fundamentally change the international order. This is what we call strategic simultaneity.’

While I’m laying out the difficulties facing Europe, while I’m showing how little this measly report will help, I look into the MP’s eyes. Some of them look shaken. But others are looking down at their phones or shuffling their papers. At the end of my eight-minute speech, I see my iPhone light up with a new WhatsApp message. ‘You’re always so superbly refreshing, Stefanie.’

Right. Is that all? It looks like it isn't – soon questions fire in my directions. How likely do I think a Russian invasion *really* is? How capable is Ukraine of defending itself? Am I seriously suggesting we abandon this flagship paper that Germany helped launch?

I repeat my thoughts, doubling down. This is a once-in-a-lifetime period of strategic upheaval. Even if war in Ukraine were avoided, there is no way we can return to the status quo with regards to Moscow. But as I am speaking, I notice once more that I am not going to get through to anyone here. It's no use. The MPs are questioning me on small details; nobody is addressing the real issue of how we will react following a Russian attack on Ukraine.

The chairman finally thanks me for my 'clear words' and calls the nearly three-hour meeting to a close. 'That was productive,' says the SPD representative sitting next to me. 'We should do this more often.'

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### **Western Dilemmas**

Has the West reacted bravely to Russian aggression so far? I mean, not really.

Of course, NATO and the EU have stood behind Ukraine, showing solidarity. They have carefully prepared numerous statements for the media, they have strongly condemned Moscow. Most UN members have supported Ukraine in its legitimate self-defence struggle against Russia. Meanwhile, the EU has adopted a comprehensive series of punitive sanctions against Russia. The international aid machinery was also quickly set in motion. NATO, the EU, the G7, and the UN are supporting Ukraine with considerable humanitarian, economic, financial and military resources. In addition, many other projects have been launched by individual countries for Ukraine. It is of course challenging to organise and coordinate such wide-ranging international assistance, and to adapt it to Ukrainian needs. It is no wonder, then, that political decision-makers have been shuffling from one summit meeting to another over the past 14 months, dragging their feet. Political crisis management is the default in Western governments.

Western strategy consists of three elements – extensive sanctions against Russia, preparation of

NATO's defences, and the provision of military, financial, economic, and humanitarian support to Ukraine. These elements rely, essentially, on Putin ending his brutal campaign against Ukraine at some point soon (either because of external political and economic pressure or his own insight) and withdrawing his troops from Ukraine. So far, though - I am writing these lines in February 2023 - this plan has not worked. Putin has shown no interest in ending his military operations. No political deal is in sight.

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Nobody wants there to be direct military action for fear of nuclear war. The consequences of such conflict would be incalculable. NATO General Secretary Stoltenberg recognises this would trigger inferno in Europe. However, for the government in Washington, the strategic focus remains on conflict with China. The war in Ukraine does not change this. American deterrence and defence forces would be indispensable in a possible military conflict with China, presumably over Taiwan. If military capacities were tied up in an armed conflict in European, the USA would be unable to defend its own interests and allies in the Pacific region.

On the European side, especially in Germany and France, other considerations prevail; above all the fear of nuclear escalation. Chancellor Olaf Scholz never tires of emphasising that the German government is doing everything it can to protect Germany from military conflict with Russia.

But even during serious discussions in Europe about providing direct military assistance to Ukraine, it has been acknowledged that America's military capabilities would be needed to supplement our own. Europe has long been lacking its own reconnaissance, transport, and command resources as well as missile and air defence systems.

So, Washington's decisions, as well as the support they receive from Europe, have led to two serious consequences: first, Ukraine is paying the horrendous price of its own life and limb in defending its national statehood, territorial integrity, and national identity; second, the allies have set the parameters for Russia's operations in Ukraine with their decision not to intervene directly with military means in the war. Instead, the Allies have placed a strategic focus on their own defence. This was bound to lead to a dilemma for the West.

Moscow benefits greatly from NATO’s declaration that they do not under any circumstances want to be directly involved in the war - it does not have to prepare for a military reaction from NATO in its operations against Ukraine. Western arms deliveries, training, and provision of real-time military information to Ukraine strengthen its combat, operational, and sustainability capabilities. But in its operational planning against Ukrainian targets, Moscow can confidently assume that no NATO forces, either individual or collective, will show up on the Ukrainian battlefield.

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**Brussels, NATO Headquarters, November 2011**

*‘What does Ukraine need to do to get closer to joining NATO?’ Sitting across from me is Vitali Klitschko, former world heavyweight champion. As the newly elected leader of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR), he wants to run as its top candidate in next year’s parliamentary elections. He explains that foreign and defence policy issues are just as important to him as financial and social issues. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Brussels asked for a meeting with NATO. After a lot of back and forth with the Secretary General’s cabinet, Klitschko ended up with me. He does let on how he feels about this, whether he is disappointed that I am the one sitting opposite him instead of Anders Fogh Rasmussen.*

*‘Do you want to hear NATO’s official line, or my own opinion?’ I ask in return.*

*‘Both would be nice.’ His eyes are fixed intently on me.*

*‘Before Ukraine can be invited into the official Membership Action Plan, it must continue to work on reforms. These reforms should concern all areas of government: defence and politics, the economy and rule of law. The allies want to see that the Ukrainian government is fighting corruption consistently and is continuing to work on consolidating democratic institutions.’*

*‘Yes, that’s what I heard this morning during my talks in the EU,’ Vitali interrupts. ‘But what does that actually mean in concrete terms? Ukraine has participated in almost all NATO operations in recent years. We supported you in Kosovo, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Afghanistan. We were even with you in Iraq. Our forces also, of course, supported NATO maritime operations in the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa.’ Vitali takes a breath before saying, ‘We are currently participating in 10 NATO programmes to improve our defence structures. What more can we do?’*

*Vitali has done his homework. He is well informed about the various partnership programmes between Ukraine and NATO.*

*‘You have to convince two nations in particular: Germany and France. Berlin and Paris are simply against Ukraine joining the Membership Action Plan because Moscow might perceive it as a provocation. As long as this attitude persists, there will be no consensus among the allies. And Ukraine will be on hold forever.’*

*‘But Russia is becoming more authoritarian and aggressive by the day. Look at Georgia. Moscow could threaten us directly too, one day.’ Vitali gives me a questioning look. ‘In my eyes, you have three courses of action,’ I reply. ‘First, stay on the course of reform. Don’t give the allies any reason – none whatsoever - to accuse Ukraine of being behind on reform. Second, continue to work on strengthening your national defence capabilities. As long as Ukraine is only a partner of NATO, the allies will not step into the firing line for you. And third, create a political support circle. Rally a group of NATO countries that would be prepared to lobby Berlin and Paris diplomatically. A group that will aggressively promote Ukraine’s accession to NATO. This should ideally include Washington.’*

*‘Thank you for your frank words.’*

*Vitali and I look almost simultaneously at the clock hanging on the wall. We have been sitting together for more than an hour. ‘From the bottom of my heart, I wish you good luck,’ I say as I stand up, trying an encouraging smile. Vitali’s handshake is firm and resolute. We take a few more handshake photos in front of the NATO logo and then I escort Vitali back towards the exit. I return to my office depressed.*

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Obama's New START treaty was met with relief by allies in Brussels. Any hostile tension between NATO and Russia, first triggered by Moscow's vehement refusal to admit Ukraine and Georgia and then later by Russian military intervention in Georgia, had finally given way to a political thaw. In Berlin, the atmosphere following the announcement of Obama's 'Russian reset' policy was almost euphoric. In Warsaw, Riga, Vilnius, and Tallinn, on the other hand, the issue of Georgia was still very much present. The lazy compromise at the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008, which vaguely promised admission to the alliance for the two candidate countries, had also contributed to this.

Since the first bilateral meeting between Obama and Medvedev in London on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009, both sides had made rapid progress, especially in their negotiations on the New START treaty, which would further limit nuclear weapons on both sides. The treaty was negotiated in record time and signed by Obama and Medvedev in Prague on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2010. The fact that the Russian side was prepared to negotiate the disarmament treaty so quickly had something to do with the fact that the Obama administration had recently announced, in September 2009, that it would replace the missile defence system planned by the Bush administration in Poland and the Czech Republic with a European missile defence system (European Phased Adaptive Approach, EPAA), to be implemented in four phases. Moscow could in no way interpret the new plan as a threat to its own strategic arsenal.

*The heads of state are all gathered around the table. Medvedev asks for the floor. He lists his carefully chosen political soundbites: historic meeting, modernisation partnership, common interest in solving the most important security problems, et cetera. Yes, Russia and NATO have different views on the events in Georgia. But the common ground between the two parties outweighs the differences, at least in Moscow's eyes. Russia's president then lists the three most important decisions made at the summit by the NATO-Russia Council: the authorisation of a joint comprehensive analysis of 21<sup>st</sup> century security*

*challenges; the launch of a joint study on tactical missile defence systems in Europe; and Moscow's support for NATO in its operation in Afghanistan, which includes a joint budget for Afghan helicopters and the permission to transport non-military goods to Afghanistan via Russian territory. The relief in the room is almost palpable. Obama beams at his Russian counterpart. Medvedev's words sound conciliatory and confident. At the end of his speech, the Russian president praises the meeting in Lisbon, calling it the beginning of a 'truly modern and strategic partnership' between NATO and his country. Italian President Silvio Berlusconi cannot stay in his seat. He stands up, his long brown coat hanging loosely over his shoulders, walks around the table and embraces Medvedev. Yet the Polish and Baltic presidents' faces betray more restraint. In their countries, the topic of Georgia is still on their minds.*

*How different this is to the meeting with Putin in Bucharest, I think. In April last year, the coldness emanating from the then-President of Russia turned the meeting hall into an ice rink. He expressed only dark accusations - and threats, even - against the allies. Putin was incensed that the Alliance had even considered including Georgia and Ukraine in its programme for candidate countries. There was no room for common ground. President George W. Bush tried forcefully to convince the Russian President in the closed NATO-Russia meeting that NATO was interested in a genuine partnership with Moscow, that even if Ukraine and Georgia were considered for membership, he shouldn't see it as a threat. But this was all in vain. I still remember the pinched expression on Putin's face after Bush made an almost emotional appeal to him. Like a Russian Vito Corleone.*

*What's really going on here? I think. The other heads of state's questions whizz past me. I don't buy Medvedev's smooth performance. His so-called modernising Russia is becoming more authoritarian by the day. And Moscow's military intervention in Georgia cannot be ignored. The new and old presidents of Russia are just playing good cop/bad cop with us, I write in my notepad. This is nothing more than a flash in the pan.*

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### **Back to the Future**

From quite early on, the developments of both continental powers – Russia and China – were the focus of our work.

We had drawn up the first scenarios of possible military action by Russia against Ukraine as early as 2013. After Moscow’s illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and large parts of eastern Ukraine, we focused our attention particularly on the military and hybrid strategies that Russia could use to achieve its strategic goals in eastern and south-eastern Europe as well as in the Arctic. During this period, scenarios emerged that focused on the possible military seizure of Mariupol and Odessa and the entire Donbas region, playing out the strategic consequences for Ukraine.

#### ***September 2013: Old NATO headquarters in Brussels.***

*It is early in the afternoon and I am standing in the long corridor of the NATO headquarters, directly in front of the security gate. It separates the press hall (which is open to journalists and registered visitors) and the restaurant and cafeteria from the huge part of the building where NATO members have their permanent headquarters. This is also where most of the main departments are located, along with many meeting rooms. Lunchtime is almost over, and colleagues are heading back to their offices at a steady pace.*

*I wait. Every ten seconds, I return a colleague’s friendly ‘Hi, Stef’ or nod back with a friendly smile.*

*I wait, trying to suppress the anxiety that I have been feeling since this morning.*

*Tuesday is an important day here. Every Tuesday, NATO ambassadors meet for their informal luncheon – ‘PermReps luncheon’, to use official NATO jargon. The Permanent Representatives will sit in the restaurant and discuss a special topic. The catering staff serve them discreetly and skilfully; the long rows of tables are covered in notepads and microphones leaving little room for plates and cutlery. The General Secretary officially presides over the lunch. It is he who proposes a topic for discussion, such as ‘The role of*

*NATO partners in the Asia-Pacific region’ or ‘A Roadmap for more in-depth cooperation with Mauritania’. Every now and then, a NATO delegation will make a proposal, particularly if there is a topic that is of special importance, or if it wants to test the reactions of the other nations. Officially, the Tuesday lunches are meant to promote an informal, open, and interactive discussion. But, of course, the 30 ambassadors rarely speak up spontaneously, and certainly not without prior consultation with their national leaders.*

*Today, the Secretary General is not present. This means his deputy, Alexander Vershbow, is in the chair. The ambassadors call him Sandy, NATO staff call him DSG (short for Deputy Secretary General). As an American diplomat, he has spent his long career in the State Department. He enjoys as much recognition in NATO capitals as he does among partner countries. Ambassador Vershbow has held several posts in Moscow and knows NATO inside out from previous roles. He is very well connected in the political capital of Washington. He is always friendly, without pretensions, and known for playing the drums and reading fiction. In short, DSG Vershbow is extremely popular with NATO staff.*

*I wait for him to come out of the restaurant. With a bit of luck, I might get a first reaction from him. After all, he is presenting my paper for discussion today: ‘Russia’s strategic objectives in Eastern Europe’.*

*This 10-page analysis departs significantly from the existing NATO consensus on Russia. Its core message is that Russia is no longer a reliable strategic partner for the Alliance. Contrary to the political rhetoric coming out of Moscow, the Russian government will use all means of influence, including hybrid and military tools, to cement its claim over much of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The security of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova would be particularly threatened by Russian expansionism. But the Kremlin has been steadily trying to expand its strategic influence in Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro too. According to the paper, the Alliance should prepare itself for confrontation with Russia, sustainably increasing its defence capability at the external borders and keeping a close eye on Ukraine in particular. This would allow us some control over the outcome of Russia’s aggressive revisionism. All in all, the Allies should adopt a strategic change of direction*

*vis-à-vis the Putin regime.*

*He finally comes over. Stops and smiles at me. ‘Your paper was a smash hit, Stef! We had a great discussion. Come to my office this afternoon for a debrief. I’ll tell you in detail how the discussion went.’*

*I smile back in relief. Some NATO ambassadors walk past me. ‘Great discussion paper,’ says the Greek ambassador. The Permanent Representative of Estonia also stops: ‘That was more than overdue. Thank you.’*

*Two hours later, I am sitting in Ambassador Vershbow’s office with some colleagues from the International Staff. While he scans the written notes, he summarises the most important statements. Point by point.*

*Many ambassadors praised the analytical part of the paper. Others also praised the recommendations for action. Others, on the other hand, despite describing the discussion as relevant and useful, expressed fundamental reservations about a strategic rethink on Russia. Further developments should first be carefully observed. The staff should prepare further analyses of Russia’s activities in Eastern Europe and Ukraine. ‘Let’s stick to current NATO policy on Russia,’ is essentially what they were saying. ‘No political experiments.’ I listen carefully to what DSG is saying. At least some nations didn’t immediately reject my analysis, I think. The concerns raised by the usual obstructionists, on the other hand, do not surprise me.*

*‘Has a concrete follow-up activity been planned?’ I ask. ‘Perhaps a formal Council meeting where the issue can be explored further?’*

*‘No, not for now,’ the DSG replies. ‘But keep this kind of thing coming. Keep sending your analyses to me.’*

And we did exactly that. Over the next years, we produced a large number of analyses that addressed Russia’s possible courses of action at the Alliance’s external borders: in the Arctic, in Africa, and in the Middle East. We also took a close look, of course, at Moscow’s relations with China, India, and Iran. While the Allies were trying to agree on a credible and effective response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine after 2014, we increasingly turned

our attention to China. We were particularly interested in China’s development as a global agent, the formulation of its strategic interests, and the toolkit that it was constantly developing. We also looked at its rapidly developing military potential - and the possibility that political leadership in Beijing would pursue its strategic ambitions on a regional and global scale with military means. Our focus, for example, included the modernisation programme of the Chinese navy and its operational options beyond the South China Sea. But we also looked at China’s various Silk Road initiatives and the resulting manifold political and economic influence possibilities, its base policy in the Horn of Africa – and, last but not least, its increasing presence on the southern and south-eastern flanks of the Alliance and its deepening strategic partnerships with Russia, Iran, and the EU as well as individual NATO partners.

We also frequently covered the dynamics of the wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, the development possibilities of Islamic terrorism as well as future scenarios for a post-NATO Afghanistan. In addition, we offered analyses of longer-term trends, examining, for instance, the connection between future armed conflicts in the Middle East and food shortages in Africa, or the emergence of new Islamic State offshoots in particularly fragile regions of the Sahel and West Africa.

We looked, too, at the possible impact of new technologies on the global order. Artificial intelligence and blockchain, for example, greatly concerned us. We developed scenarios for the use of crypto to circumvent international sanctions by authoritarian regimes.

Of the three Military Committee chairmen who succeeded each other in this position between 2012-2020, two were more than open to our work, while the third, a British general, showed no interest at all in our forecasts. Still, although a four-star general has a very tight schedule, the Danish and Czech Military Committee chairmen who succeeded him a few years later regularly took the time to discuss our papers in depth. Both men, Knud Bartels and Petr Pavel, were well prepared for the respective meetings content-wise, showed real interest in the topics and, above all, did not shy away from engaging in an interactive and open discussion with us. After each of these meetings, our team went back to work feeling almost inspired: at least one of our two main clients was open to strategic advice.

Personal meetings with the Secretary General were rare. While Anders Fogh Rasmussen at least

found the occasional moment for a short talk with me, it was almost impossible to get an appointment with his successor Stoltenberg. The team hardly ever received a direct response from him. We can only assume that he read our papers and found them helpful for political discussions with the ambassadors.

After all, Stoltenberg initially authorised for more than half of our forecasts to be discussed during the ambassadors' informal lunch meetings. Since staff do not participate in these discussions as a matter of principle, our only option was to look for indirect feedback to learn anything about the allies' reactions to our impulse papers, so that we could draw conclusions for future analyses. When – and whether - our work was used for discussion in a Council or Committee meeting was decided by the NATO Secretary General. I had to campaign hard in his cabinet and with the relevant heads of department in order for our analyses and forecasts to be brought to political light at *all*. In general, the cabinet circulated our analyses at headquarters in a highly selective manner. Since they were almost invariably classified as 'confidential', 'secret', or 'close hold', even relevant heads of department or technical referees sometimes did not get to see our papers.

However, when the forecasts *did* make it to the North Atlantic Council or another NATO committee, they were consistently met with a positive response from the allies. It would be, of course, difficult to assess whether the respective contents and recommendations for action had a political effect, or whether the praise of individual delegations was merely an expression of diplomatic politeness. As a rule, the Secretary General and his staff did not systematically evaluate the respective discussions and determine possible follow-up activities.

Looking back on the eight years as head of the strategic preview team, it seems to me that I spent as much time on the in-house publicity campaign as on the actual intellectual development of our products and policy recommendations for action. Sometimes I was successful, but often I was not, our analyses disappearing, unread, into the shallows of NATO bureaucracy.

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### **China's Attention and Roll Back Putinism**

Launching a holistic 'Roll Back Putinism' strategy is also of enormous importance with regard to our future relationship with China. The key messages of this kind of strategy would certainly be closely followed in Beijing: how we, in the West, intend to respond to Russia's military aggression in the long term; how strong our political resolve to hold the Putin regime to account is; in what form we will strengthen our economic and social resilience; and how great our willingness to actually invest in our military defence capability is. These are all extremely relevant for leadership in Beijing. For it is on this basis that China will plan its subsequent political steps, above all in order to move towards its most important strategic goals in the Asia-Pacific region and Taiwan.

A Western containment strategy towards Russia cannot, of course, be literally transferred to our future relations with China. China, in its current form, does not pose a direct military threat. But that could change in the future. Key elements of our Russia strategy could and therefore *should* be reflected in our long-term China strategy. This includes our responses to Beijing's targeted military intimidation and economic blackmail against regional neighbours and democratic governments critical of China; Beijing's systematic investment in operational, technologically advanced nuclear forces; its hybrid instruments of influence over our political and economic decisions.

It is high time for Germany and its transatlantic partners to design a long-term and functional strategy based on a more precise statement than 'China is our partner, competitor, and system rival'. In reality, China is becoming more and more of a system rival. This applies not only to the fierce competition for the development of cutting-edge technology, but also to Beijing's various silk roads around the world. For the communist party in Beijing, these are clearly an instrument of power projection. Economic cooperation and collaboration on global issues such as climate change and disarmament should therefore go hand in hand with a clear message to Beijing that NATO partners are ready to stand together, at a national level, against Chinese cyber-attacks, technological espionage, and theft, as well as military intimidation.

At the same time, NATO members need to seriously address Taiwan scenarios and their possible

strategic, political and economic consequences. The exact timing of a forced reintegration of Taiwan into the Chinese communist motherland is almost secondary. China's leadership has not made a secret of the fact that it wants to complete the task set out at the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 within the next few years. It could be that Beijing plans on annexing Taiwan on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army in 2027. More important, in any case, are the circumstances and far-reaching consequences for the global economy, the Asia-Pacific, and European security that such a move would trigger. Allies, including German companies active in China, would be well-advised to prepare for Case X with the help of projections and political, economic, and military contingency planning.

In my view, the most important things to consider for our 'Roll Back Putinism' strategy are:

1) The top political priority must be to permanently support Ukraine's existential security. The government in Kiev set out two goals: to restore state sovereignty and to maintain territorial integrity (in the borders established in 1991). If the Western defence alliance is not prepared to actively intervene in military conflict for the benefit of Ukraine, provision of military self-defence capacities is the least that we can do. In concrete terms, this means that we must further equip Ukraine militarily. If Russia were to establish itself in even a small part of Ukraine's territory, Moscow will continue to 'denazify' these areas and use them as a springboard for future military operations against Ukraine.

Russia's military 'centres of gravity' are the Crimean Peninsula, the Black Sea region, and the occupied territories south-east of the Dnieper. In order to prevent Moscow from continuing to attack Ukraine from there with cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and drones, any future Western military support package must include ranged weapons, long-range artillery, battle tanks, drones and air and missile defence systems. Without targeted, closely coordinated Western arms assistance, it will be impossible for Ukrainian armed forces to achieve their military goals.

As long as we are supporting Ukraine, we should avoid at all costs the mistakes made in Afghanistan. In the Hindu Kush, where previous German governments thought they had to defend our security, an increasingly confusing array of representatives from various international

organisations, individual states and non-governmental organisations supported and advised an overstretched Afghan government. The coordination between all these different actors did not work at all. In the end, no one wanted to take responsibility. Military equipment worth billions ended up either stuck in no man’s land or in the hands of the Taliban. And the billions of dollars of financial support pumped into the country by the international community only fed corruption and cronyism in Afghanistan.

The patchwork of support measures discussed and decided upon by NATO, the EU, the G7, and through bilateral channels must not overburden Ukraine’s national absorption capabilities. Arms deliveries, military training assistance, and non-lethal equipment must be closely coordinated. What goes into Ukraine must be fully transparent and traceable: this needs to be built into the Western assistance process. In January 2023, the first allegations of corruption in connection with Western aid were already surfacing.<sup>1</sup> For Ukraine, such incidents are a fire hazard: if corruption cases become more frequent, the willingness of donor countries to continue supporting them with generous funds will be massively reduced. Moreover, it makes little sense for both NATO (through its Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine) and the EU (through its Peace Facility Fund) to set up the same – or very similar – projects in Ukraine. Last winter, power generators, diesel, and first aid kits were sent to Ukraine in parallel. Military training and planning expertise are clearly on the side of the Alliance, while the EU should focus primarily on economic-financial reconstruction and humanitarian support.

As long as Ukraine is a neighbour to the unpredictable, unstable, and aggressive Russia, its security can ultimately only be guaranteed within the framework of NATO membership. In my view, there is no way around this. In principle, the Alliance already made the decision to admit the country in 2008 at the Bucharest Summit. The Allies should not continue to treat this decision as a political taboo. Ukraine has been demonstrating every day for more than a year now that it has an iron will, is willing to defend itself, and that it has an effective military fighting force. In doing so, it is also defending the security of the Alliance’s eastern borders against Russia, even if it is not a NATO member. Against this backdrop, nine Alliance members have already spoken out

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/korruption-ermittlungen-reform-ukraine-krieg-russland-100.html>

in favour of starting the political accession process. Opponents argue, on the other hand, that the country cannot be admitted as long as it is engaged in territorial conflict with Moscow. We are presented with, in essence, a fundamental strategic question: should the allies continue to make Ukraine’s accession conditional on Moscow’s veto or not? The answer to this is clear to me: no.

However, since there is currently no majority support in the Alliance for my suggested way forward – and, above all, the American government has not given us the go-ahead – alternatives should be discussed with Ukraine as quickly and diplomatically as possible. Reliance on hardcore security guarantees from a coalition of supporters could be an interim solution for Ukraine. For example, such a coalition could be formed by the members of UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, strengthened by Poland and the US. Former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has already made substantial proposals on the issue of security guarantees, proposals which have been agreed with the Ukrainian side.<sup>2</sup> So far, however, the ‘Kiyv Security Compact’ has not come up in political discussions in Germany. NATO headquarters also seem to have taken little notice of it. This should change, as the proposals are definitely worth discussing. However, without American participation, military-based security guarantees for Ukraine would be on shaky ground. The European deterrence and defence capacities that would have to be deployed in the event of renewed Russian aggression are limited. The bilateral security guarantees that the USA has given to Israel and Taiwan could provide inspiration here. However, the basic rule for all conceivable bilateral or multilateral security guarantees for Ukraine is that they must be accompanied by a credible military deterrence and defence commitment that also has a nuclear component. Otherwise, they will not be worth the paper they are written on.

Furthermore, the democratic community should support Ukraine in its demands that Russia be prosecuted for the war crimes it has committed. It should oblige the Kremlin to pay for war damages. The more concrete the substantive preparations in these two important areas, the sooner they can be operationalised. Some have suggested that as criminal prosecution could be understood by the Kremlin a form of surrender, it should not be officially put on the table. This is

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/garantiyi-bezpeki-dlya-ukrayini-zabezpechat-stabilnist-usiye-78165>

irrelevant. Those who advocate the restoration of national and international legal certainty should first and foremost also be interested in its practical and consistent implementation.

The debate over whether to use the International Criminal Court (ICC) or a special tribunal (as demanded by Ukraine) to prosecute Russian war crimes is not insignificant. One argument against a trial conducted by the ICC is that Russia is not a member and therefore the court cannot investigate Russian citizens. On the other hand, a special tribunal could expose itself to the criticism that it is easier to manipulate politically. A special tribunal under the umbrella of the United Nations and supported by the EU is probably the most suitable way to give such a body as much political support as possible from third countries and thus international legitimacy.

Heads of state and government as well as foreign ministers are immune from prosecution abroad during their respective terms of office, even if they are charged with crimes under international law. And so, the chances that President Putin or Foreign Minister Lavrov will find themselves before a special tribunal in the foreseeable future are not great. But past trials for war crimes, for example after the disintegration process in the former Yugoslavia, or in Rwanda, have made it clear that those politically responsible can certainly be held accountable. Moreover, state functionaries at lower levels enjoy only functional immunity, which does not protect them from prosecution for crimes under international law. Thus, at least Russian commanders and Kremlin political contractors who committed war crimes in Ukraine could be held officially accountable.

2) Russia's implementation of its foreign and military policy must be systematically limited and contained. In concrete terms, this means weakening Moscow's military, economic, financial, and technological capabilities for military and hybrid warfare in such a way that it can no longer realistically pursue its expansionist goals against either Ukraine or other neighbouring states. This includes above all Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkan region. A Western containment strategy, however, must also keep a close eye on regions that are strategically important for Moscow, such as the Arctic, the Mediterranean, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Moscow's attempts to create political and economic advantages in these regions to aid in its war against Ukraine should be specifically countered. We must critically review our relations with countries that maintain close ties with Russia. Where and in what form could Moscow want to strengthen

its influence there in the future? And what means could the West use to counter this? Moscow's nuclear arsenal will continue, for the foreseeable future, to pose a fundamental threat to the West. A nuclear-free or at least nuclear-reduced Russia would be the ideal, but unrealistic, solution. Even a successive Russian government would probably not be prepared to disarm its strategic and tactical missiles on a large scale. Nevertheless, our goal must be to make Russia's nuclear potential transparent again, i.e., subject it to international and verifiable inspections, and to reduce its size. The latter should be a central point in the diplomatic negotiations after the war in Ukraine. A recommencement of nuclear arms control talks in a bilateral format with the USA would be an important prerequisite for this.

3) We should help Ukraine's particularly vulnerable neighbouring states to strengthen their national security and defend their state sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russian influence. The Moldovan Republic, in particular, not being a member of NATO, faces an uncertain fate. Since the pro-Western government led by Maia Sandu sided with Ukraine and reaffirmed its will to join the EU, Kremlin leadership has expended a lot of energy on blackmailing. The fivefold increase in the price of natural gas and the rising inflation rates are putting pressure on Europe's poorest country and fuelling public criticism of the government's course of economic reform.

In its tried and tested manner, Moscow is trying to organise public protest. Since part of Moldova has been occupied by some 2000 Russian troops since 1992, Moscow could use its military presence to politically destabilise or militarily occupy the independent part of the country. Should the Kremlin succeed in overthrowing the current government and forcing the country into prolonged political and economic destabilisation, it would be much more difficult for the West to protect Moldova from Moscow's hybrid threats.

The constitution of the Republic of Moldova stipulates its state of neutrality. In recent years, the country has come closer to NATO, becoming a partner state (although still not a full member). How could it be, when half of its land is occupied by Russian troops? The Moldovan armed forces are small, with only around 6,500 soldiers; their military equipment still comes mainly from Soviet stocks. The least we can do is to strengthen Moldova's national defence capabilities and economic stability. EU donor conferences held so far are taking steps in the right direction. The long-term

perspective of joining the EU would also send a political signal. The same applies to the military upgrade programmes that NATO has been organising for Moldovan armed forces for a few years now. Among other things, they aim to improve the armed forces' interoperability and cyber-defence capabilities.

Ultimately, however, only concrete military protection guarantees from NATO or individual NATO allies would guarantee the security of the small republic. A complete withdrawal of Russian troops from parts of the country should be the ultimate goal of Western containment policy. In order to come closer to this, NATO members should finally begin to look at the Republic of Moldova from a broader strategic perspective and muster the political will to help it free itself from the clutches of Russian occupation.

Georgia has also had to live with Russian troops on parts of its territory since 2008. And it, too, has been striving for both NATO and EU membership for years. But in contrast to Moldova, swathes of its political and economic classes shy away from this. The Georgian government's will to reform has clearly diminished in recent years. Its integration into the Euro-Atlantic area is no longer a certainty. This has also become apparent with regard to the war in Ukraine. Its policy of neutrality towards Moscow culminated in the ruling party not agreeing to the Council of Europe's resolution condemning Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.

To make matters worse for Georgia, a recent wave of refugees from Russia has exacerbated wider socio-economic problems and thus political tensions. How should Georgia accommodate 120,000 refugees who have arrived from a country that is already occupying parts of its own state? The fear that the Kremlin will one day want to 'protect' its citizens who fled to Georgia by violent means is omnipresent in the country's political discourse. The West should therefore react with empathy and concrete financial assistance. A democratic Georgia should continue to be welcomed as a member of the Euro-Atlantic family.

4) Fundamentally, we should rethink and adjust our relations with Russia's friends and partners around the world. A complete international isolation of Russia is unrealistic. Despite all international protests against its illegal behaviour, Moscow remains well-connected with authoritarian regimes like Iran and China. Other countries, such as India, are also not prepared

to break officially with Moscow for economic reasons. Still others, such as South Africa or Brazil, do not want to take the side of Ukraine and its supporters. We should always make our position on the Ukraine war clear to them. But we should also look more closely at countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria and some of the Central African states. Moscow maintains lucrative economic relations with these countries. Germany should condition its foreign, economic, and development policies much more strongly in these regions, making where we stand in this conflict clear to the governments there. There can be no ‘business as usual’ with us. Of course, consistent support of rules-based order has nothing to do with schoolmasterly speeches about the advantages of democratic order.

New, positive opportunities could also arise when CIS states distance themselves politically from Moscow. The governments in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan are slowly but surely distancing themselves from the Kremlin. We should use the resulting opportunities with a concerted diplomatic offensive to lobby for more support for Ukraine.

We must also put to the test our relations with the regime in Tehran, which has, since Autumn 2022, been demonstrating brutality against its own citizens. In terms of foreign policy, Iran not only continues to maintain a close partnership with Putin, but has also been supplying Russia with modern weapons. With the delivery of combat drones and cruise missiles, Iran is filling important gaps in Russia’s military arsenal. The regime in Tehran seems to have largely lost interest in reviving the nuclear deal (JCPOA) suspended by Trump in 2018. It wants to continue on its own nuclear course, preferably with the help of Moscow. Nuclear weaponisation would massively strengthen Iran’s weight in the region, opening up new opportunities for the regime to pursue its aggressive policy. Increased sanctions against Iran, as decided in December 2022 by the EU and Canada, the UK, and the USA, will not prevent the Mullah regime from pushing ahead with its nuclear armament. If negotiations in Vienna on Iran’s nuclear programme fail, the West will need a plan B anyway. The key to this lies above all in Israel and its closest military ally in Washington. Both countries have shown in the past that they have the political will and the capabilities to reduce Iran’s nuclear infrastructure with targeted military strikes. Military intervention against targets in Iran would, of course, likely lead to consequences in the region. Iran’s militias in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen could cause considerable unrest. Even if it is

difficult for Kiev and some of its Western supporters to accept that Israel does not support Ukraine militarily, Netanyahu's government could contribute significantly to weakening the Moscow-Iran axis. Western, including German, diplomatic efforts should work towards this goal.

Moscow has already been excluded from some multinational forums (the Council of Europe, the G7). It retains, however, a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, owing to its significant powers. This seat has been a useful vehicle for Moscow to torpedo important UN decisions for decades. Russia's war against Ukraine, its war crimes, and its irresponsible use of nuclear weapons should be reason enough to expel it from the Security Council. The UN Charter offers legal possibilities for this. This would involve serious political hurdles, but the mere fact that the majority of UN members would still choose to go down this path would send a strong signal to Moscow and all the other violent regimes that undermine the organisation's peace mandate.

5) The EU already significantly weakened Russia's economic and technological capabilities with its previous sanction packages. In principle, our goal must be to keep our economic dependence on Putin to an absolute minimum. There are also other areas that should be sanctioned. These include, above all, the transfer of nuclear energy services, including uranium, from Russia to some EU countries, as well as the import of Russian raw materials such as diamonds.

Russia's supplying of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the EU should also be more tightly controlled. Since the beginning of the war, imports have increased by 21%. Most of Russia's LNG goes to Spain and France, but countries like Belgium have also increased their imports from Russia in 2022. Many European governments, including the German *Ampelkoalition* (traffic light coalition), see LNG imports as an ideal alternative to the previous Russian gas imports by pipeline. But despite the halt of gas deliveries via regular pipelines like Nord Stream 1, Moscow still earns billions by exporting LNG to Europe. It is likely that considerable quantities of Russian liquefied natural gas have already flowed into German storage facilities via LNG deliveries from neighbouring European countries. According to gas experts, 13% of European LNG imports

currently come from Russia, and this is only increasing.<sup>3</sup> Currently, there are no regulations preventing gas importers from buying Russian LNG on the spot market and importing it to Germany via intermediaries. This practice should stop – as soon as possible - if the EU does not want to further support the Russian state budget.

Particular political weak points in the EU’s sanctions policy towards Moscow are undoubtedly Hungary and Turkey. Both continue to maintain close economic ties with Russia; both continue to purchase Russian natural gas via the Turkstream pipeline. Since the beginning of the sanctions, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán has repeatedly undermined and thwarted European sanctions against the Kremlin and obtained exemptions for his country. And Turkish President Erdoğan has gone one step further – his government actively does not support sanctions against Moscow. Instead, he and Putin have agreed on even closer economic cooperation. President Putin’s recent proposal to develop, with Turkey, a supply hub for natural gas should swing EU members into action.

6) We must, of course, sustainably strengthen our own military resilience. In the coming years, Germany must consistently invest in the *Bundeswehr* so that it can implement national and alliance defence tasks. In order to achieve the new defence goals set at the 2022 NATO summit, and to even come close to NATO’s 2% defence investment guideline, extensive, long-term financial resources need to be planned. These should be spent above all on better personnel and material equipment as well as a significant increase in military exercises. The first point, in turn, requires rigorous reforms of the procurement system. As long as a large part of the defence budget is flowing into personnel costs, the operational readiness of the *Bundeswehr*, whether for national or alliance defence tasks, will not be able to properly improve. Technologically advanced cyber defence capabilities, a fundamental modernisation of civil protection, and efficient defence mechanisms against Russia’s disinformation campaigns should also be advanced in a synchronised manner.

There is not much time left for a real strengthening of joint defence and arms cooperation on a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/energie/milliarden-euro-fuer-putin-lng-importe-aus-russland-steigen-auf-rekordhoch/28848426.htmls://taz.de/LNG-Terminal-geht-in-Betrieb/!5900874/>

NATO and EU level. If Europe’s goal is to be able to defend itself more independently in the future, and to be able to react to military conflicts in Europe without substantial American support, then the level of military ambition must be significantly higher than a 5,000-strong intervention force ready for deployment in 2025. Europeans must launch a larger number of joint armaments projects and share their military capacities even more systematically. In order to achieve more efficient development of common military capability goals, NATO and the EU should merge their force planning processes, which have been running in parallel up to now. It makes no sense to have two large bureaucracies working on the same issues just to compare their results every now and then.<sup>4</sup> Both organisations should also talk about financial ‘pooling’. Both the EU and NATO have established additional funding for military capabilities in recent years. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and European Defence Fund are confronted with an increased common budget from the Allies and a newly established investment fund from NATO. Here, too, efficiency could be increased if the two organisations could agree on where they want to spend the bulk of the money: preferably in ‘high-end capabilities’ (deployable combat capabilities).

In order to create common European defence capabilities, the European defence industry must also be consistently strengthened. Buying technologically advanced weapons systems from American companies may be easier, but ultimately it does not contribute to Europe’s defence sovereignty. And finally, a more independent military defence system would also take into account nuclear dimensions. Whether they like it or not, NATO members will have to engage in a debate with France and the UK on the ‘Europeanisation’ of their nuclear forces.

A military escalation in the Asia-Pacific region around Taiwan would most likely lead to a reduction of the American military presence in Europe. The re-election of Donald Trump or an ideologically similar Republican president could also lead to changes in American defence readiness and military presence for and in Europe after 2024. How do the European allies plan to react to this? Germany and its European allies, including the UK, can only prepare for such a scenario if they mobilise both their political will and their financial resources in a consistent and

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<sup>4</sup> NATO is working with individual members to develop their respective military capability goals through its National Defence Planning Process (NDPP). On the EU side, the European Defence Agency (EDA) is in charge of identifying gaps in military capability areas and developing procurement plans together with the member states. These processes should ideally be transparent and synchronised. This is not always the case.

targeted manner.

7) Multilateral organisations such as NATO and the EU have sought to maintain political cohesion during the Russian war against Ukraine. However, this effort – official rhetoric aside – has only been partially successful: on the Western side, there are at least two allies, Turkey and Hungary, who have refused to give up their political ties with Russia. This is not simply a matter of vague personal sympathies between the three leaders. There has been concrete cooperation in the areas of economy, energy, military, and intelligence. These form the ‘critical weak link’ that the Kremlin relies on to reduce Western political cohesion. Moreover, both countries, for different reasons, are blocking the admission of Sweden and Finland to NATO.

The attitudes of Hungary and Turkey, however, point to a deeper problem within NATO. The unanimity rule, established at the organisation’s founding in 1949, allows both countries to block strategically important decisions of the Alliance and to boycott them in order to maintain power. With their nationalist-populist style of government, both also undermine the credibility of the organisation, which sees itself as a democratic community of values, spreading this message all over the world. Moreover, finding consensus is extremely difficult with its 30, soon to be 32, members. NATO members should finally face up to this reality and begin serious discussions on how, and under which circumstances, the consensus principle can be modified. Should they, as one can in the EU, freeze funding and the provision of influential positions for those members whose policies are clearly counterproductive for the Alliance as a whole? Would majority rule not ultimately improve the Alliance’s ability to act? What role could a ‘coalition of the willing’ play in NATO?

These are politically very difficult questions, concerning some of the untouchable, sacred laws of the Western defence alliance. But extraordinary times call for extraordinary political measures, and maybe it is time to seek unconventional solutions. For NATO, the war in Ukraine has raised a very fundamental question: do its members have the will to shape strategy or do they, for the most part, retreat behind their fences, forming a purely ‘defensive’ community? The need to reshape the European security architecture after the war in Ukraine is all too real. If NATO wants

to strategically shape European security, its members will have to make some more courageous decisions.

I am convinced that this is a Churchill moment. The speech that the British Prime Minister delivered to the members of the American Congress on 26<sup>th</sup> December 1941 contains a message that should guide us today as well. ‘Sure I am that this day, now, we are the masters of our fate,’ he said, ‘that the task which has been set us is not above our strength. That its pangs and toils are not beyond our endurance. As long as we have faith in our cause, and an unconquerable willpower, salvation will not be denied us.’<sup>5</sup>

More than any other crisis the transatlantic community has faced in recent decades, Russia’s war of annihilation requires above all an iron political will, perseverance, and strategic foresight. All this, in turn, requires a large dose of realism and courage. Each of these qualities, as we know, starts in the head - in the head of each individual person. We can and should demand this from our political decision-makers, whether they be in Berlin, Brussels, or Washington D.C. In this extraordinary situation, it is their task to show us a viable way out of this conflict with this vicious and aggressive regime. We will not win the war with Russia by sitting it out, ducking away, or trying to ‘appease’ Putin. Not in Ukraine and not at home.

But it is not only our governments that need to act. Each of us should stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people and support them in their struggle for self-defence. They show us every day that we don’t have to be afraid of Moscow, that collective courage can move mountains. We should remember what we ourselves would lose if Russia were to assert itself in Europe. If we do not break aggressive Putinism, it will try to break *us*. To overcome this challenge, we need a watchful eye, courage, and determination.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/churchill-address-to-congress.html>