

Editorial

Dear Readers,

“Today, the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low.” These words come from the Strategic Concept of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – from 2010. This one sentence is enough to illustrate how much has changed over the past 15 years. When NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary at the Washington summit this summer, it will do so with a new Strategic Concept that reflects the massive deterioration in the security situation that we have experienced since then.

One consequence of this development is that the German public is once again talking about defence policy and significantly more people are recognising NATO for what it is: the indispensable alliance for our security. In this context, we urgently need to discuss how to keep the United States engaged in Europe, and how to strengthen German and European defence policy. Additionally, in this issue of International Reports, we are turning the spotlight on certain aspects and regional perspectives that tend to be overlooked.

“Back to the future” – this phrase has recently been used to refer to NATO on various occasions. According to this interpretation, following decades of relative calm in global politics, the Alliance basically finds itself back where it started in 1949: a bulwark against the threat from Moscow. It is indeed true that collective defence and deterring Russia have, quite rightly, become a priority again today as the German Ambassador to NATO, Géza Andreas von Geyr, explains in an interview with International Reports.

However, there are also a number of major differences compared to the Cold War era. In some ways, the situation for NATO today is even more challenging – certainly more complex and confusing – than it was back then. The tasks and problems that characterised the past three decades have not disappeared simply because of our renewed focus on Moscow. The threat posed by Islamist terrorism, unstable states in North Africa, the Sahel and the Middle East – none of this has gone away. Quite the contrary, some of those problems are even being compounded by Russia’s efforts to destabilise those regions. Despite the challenge posed by Russia in Europe, we must not forget NATO’s “southern flank”, says Lucas Lamberty in his article on the NATO advisory mission in Iraq.

Russia's role in Europe and the international system today is also different from that of the Soviet Union prior to 1991. The latter was a status quo power in Europe, while today Russia is seeking to change borders by force, using the threat of nuclear weapons as a means of exerting pressure. At the same time, in view of the rise of an increasingly aggressive China, the Kremlin is no longer the only adversary and therefore no longer the strategic priority of the United States, NATO's leading member. For the North Atlantic Alliance, and in particular for its European members, this raises the thorny question of what role it can and should play in the Indo-Pacific. After all, when the NATO Secretary General says, as he did recently in Washington, that the US should not separate the challenges posed by Russia and China in order to concentrate unilaterally on China, then the reverse is also true: we Europeans cannot leave the US to deal single-handedly with the challenge posed by China – especially politically and economically.

One effective tool in this context is NATO's partnership policy that was established in the 1990s with countries outside the geographic alliance area. This instrument has taken on new significance with today's global systemic conflict, and not only in Asia. A good example of the (mutual) benefits of these partnerships is the cooperation between NATO and Colombia, analysed in an article here by Stefan Reith. However, the partnerships with the AP4 – the Asia-Pacific Four comprising Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand – are also very valuable. They send a welcome political signal to these countries, which are united by their shared concern about Beijing's pursuit of hegemony in the region. However, the articles by Stephen Nagy on the Japanese view of NATO and by Bertil Wenger and Justin Burke on the Australian perspective highlight the fact that neither Tokyo nor Canberra expect or desire an extension of NATO security guarantees to the Indo-Pacific in any form.

The rise of China is also a relevant – albeit not the only – factor explaining the most obvious and most discussed difference between the current situation and the Cold War: the role of the United States in NATO. During the Cold War and in its aftermath, there was never any doubt about whether, if worst came to the worst, the US would honour its obligations under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Considering what the likely Republican presidential candidate in the 2024 elections has repeatedly said about NATO, this is no longer a given. And yet, when discussing the future role of

the US in the Alliance, we spend too much time talking about things that we cannot influence rather than on what is within our control. Of course, we can stare spell-bound across the Atlantic until the election in November and make indignant comments about Donald Trump's regular utterances. But, at the end of the day, those of us watching the spectacle from Europe will neither be able to vote nor be part of the next US administration.

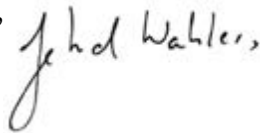
Whichever of the many potential scenarios plays out in Washington, when we ask ourselves what we can do to keep the United States in Europe and increase our own security, the answer is always the same: Germany and Europe have to do more to secure their own defence. As Peter Rough underlines in his article, Democrats and Republicans alike have been calling for fairer burden-sharing within NATO for many years now, and will continue to do so, no matter who will be the 47th US President. Should Trump win the election, concrete progress on European defence spending – not moral outrage – is likely to be the most effective way of convincing his administration to continue the United States' commitment in and for Europe. Although we Europeans may never be able to fully replace the US deterrent, strong European defence capabilities are, of course, essential; especially in the worst-case scenario of an explicit or implicit US withdrawal from NATO. However, the option that many Germans have favoured for decades – security guarantees without sufficient effort on the part of Germany itself – will no longer be available.

Against this backdrop, Christina Bellmann and Alexander Schuster ask: “Are we doing enough?” Unfortunately, the answer is no. This is also due to the fact that the debate often conducted in Germany under the heading *Zeitenwende* still fails to adequately reflect the gravity of the situation. On 27 February 2022, shortly after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said: “The world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before.” This only applies to German defence policy to a limited extent. Yes, there is significantly more money in the system in the short term, and that is a good thing. But Germany is lacking more than just material resources. What is still missing – also in comparison to our allies – is the willingness and ability to conduct genuine strategic debates in politics and society about what interests we want to pursue and how, and about which partners and material resources we need to do this.

So it was not long before the traditional domestic political mechanisms kicked in again. More defence spending, yes – as long as all other political projects remain untouched, and people’s daily lives can stay the same. In the end, however, our defence policy cannot be measured by whether we have done fairly well in light of our domestic policy constraints. A single question will be decisive: will it be enough to deter Russia? The answer to this question will determine whether we can still think about other – actually much more desirable – tasks and expenses as freely and peacefully as we have been accustomed to over the last 75 years.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G'.

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