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Reflections on Germany's Strategic Culture

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A Country Without Culture? Reflections on Germany's Strategic Culture

In the summer of 2024, Rolf Mützenich, chairman of the parliamentary group of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), publicly warned his party colleague Boris Pistorius, the Federal Minister of Defence, not to step out of line. This incident hinted at conflicting views within the German Government that became apparent against the backdrop of a very serious matter: budgetary policy. During the budget negotiations within the Government, Mr Pistorius had requested additional funds of 6.5 billion euros for defence. In autumn, however, he received only 1.2 billion euros.¹ Budgetary policy really is a mirror of the Government's actual priorities and, thus, a measure of how it perceives the overall security situation.

But how do you actually perceive what you perceive and how do you prioritise your priorities? And is a strategic mindset a prerequisite, a tool or a consequence of perception?

As a first step to answering these questions, this publication attempts to introduce the key premises of a strategic mindset. These conceptual premises are not, as they are sometimes called, esoteric ideas. Essentially, they offer an understanding of the prerequisites for security and thus for the survival of states. Consequently, they also form the basis for an emerging strategic culture. Certainly, there is *more than one* way to look at this matter, given that there are always different perceptions of the same reality and that it is impossible to fully consider security issues without also looking at other substantial approaches. Secondly, this publication will further illustrate these key premises with the help of a term that has been frequently used recently – *escalation*.

Key Premises for a Strategic Culture Based on Strength

The key conceptual premises discussed in this publication sometimes face a lack of understanding, especially by people socialised in Europe, a project for peace that has endured for almost eight decades. These people have forgotten that without WWII this peace project would not exist. And that may even have been a noble goal of this project: making us forget about war. But war – the eternal companion of humanity – is an integral part of what the German Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs meant when she

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¹ Both references, the figures and the original quote by Mützenich, are taken from: Carstens 2024.

spoke of a ‘different world’² in which she had woken up on 24 February 2022. This different world has always existed and will always exist; Europe and Germany cannot simply reason it away or wish it did not exist.

This chapter, therefore, will present the fundamental concepts of what can be called a strategic world view. This view primarily assumes that great powers, in particular, are antagonistic to each other. They are driven by their desire for power – the *animus dominandi*, as Hans Morgenthau called it – and thus strive to rigorously pursue their interests³, which means both to assert power, i.e. to ensure security, as well as to expand power. This assumption is not influenced by Western ideas, as post-colonial critics claim. In fact, it is global, as described so poignantly 2,500 years ago by the general and historian Thucydides in his work on the Peloponnesian War:

Of the gods we [the Athenians] believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist for ever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do.⁴

Great powers reaching the point where, in their view, peaceful means are no longer suitable for achieving a certain strategic objective are able to achieve their goal by using military means – because they can. This assumption is based on a view of human beings that contradicts the one that has been shaped over the past 250 years, inspired by Enlightenment ideas. The view of humans as strategists certainly sees their ability to reason, but it recognises the power of evolutionary impulses as having a much stronger effect. Over the past 20 years, this has been shown with great attention to detail by Robert Jervis, Keren Yarhi-Milo, Daniel Kahneman and others with their work on the neuroscientific and psychological study of emotions.⁵ This field of research has thus fully grasped the true sense of the word *deinos*, which describes how the Greeks understood human nature with its creative and destructive power.

Structurally, this anthropological element underlying the key premises is reinforced by the fact that the institutions of global politics have no universal and effective instruments at their disposal to contain a great power’s desire for more power, especially when the latter turns into actual violence. It is the idea of anarchy that is essential here, meaning that a larger state generally has and will continue to have the possibility to launch a military attack against another, usually smaller state, imposing its will on it by means of war, and that there will never be an effective remedy against such behaviour. With regard to the above, neither the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) – whose members often disagree for political and strategic reasons – nor international law is able to provide such a remedy. Some fascinating historical background information on this is provided in Michael Howard’s classic ‘The Invention of Peace’.⁶

In this context, Government officials are fond of saying that the law of the strongest must not prevail and that power must not break the law. The second statement represents

² Baerbock 2022.

³ Morgenthau 1985.

⁴ Thucydides 1910 [411 BC]: Book 5, Chapter 105, Section 2.

⁵ Jervis 2017a; Jervis 2017b; Yarhi-Milo 2012; Kahneman 2012.

⁶ Howard 2001.

an assumption that is morally valuable, but not more than that. As a matter of fact, law is not credible without hard power and is thus at permanent risk of being broken by power. The first statement is as driven by rationality as the second one, but overlooks the fact that only strength can make the strong see reason – because only credible strength can deter those who want to break the status quo. If deterrence fails, it is not law itself, but power that allows a state to survive, even if it does not provide a guarantee.

Our current approach to reality, however, is a very different one. In September 2023, for example, Chancellor Scholz told the United Nations ‘that we do not see a place for [...] the use of force as a political instrument’ in the ‘world of the 21st century’.⁷ And his predecessor Angela Merkel interpreted Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 as a ‘conflict about spheres of influence and territorial claims, such as those we know from the 19th and 20th century but thought we had put behind us’.⁸ Let me be clear, this notion expressed by both of them, which regards war as an outdated means of power politics, should ideally be the norm. However, world politics has too often shown that, by its very nature, it operates differently.

Combining the aforementioned anthropological and structural elements provides us with the basis for honing our strategic perception of reality, something urgently needed nowadays. For example, Clausewitz’s statement that war is the continuation of politics by other means continues to be routinely used by many people in Germany as a bad example and is intuitively rejected, reflecting exactly the above-mentioned, morally-focused idea that the law of the strongest must not prevail. In the real world of strategic affairs, however, the opposite is often true, despite many diplomatic efforts to achieve strategic deterrence. In the logics of this ‘different world’, i.e. the revisionist authoritarian world consisting of great powers (and their accomplices) that the German Minister for Foreign Affairs Baerbock spoke of on 24 February 2022, war is a legitimate means of politics. They use war as one of many political instruments; they do not consider it a failure of diplomacy, but rather see it as a natural occurrence in the course of world history.

This view presents a problem to Germany’s strategic thinking – but one that can be overcome. Of course, waging a war of aggression cannot be a guiding principle *for action* when it comes to German foreign and security policy. Nevertheless, Germany should no longer intuitively deny that the described possibility of war – which cannot be ruled out in general – must become a guiding principle *for perception* in German security policy. And Germany must do even more than embrace this guiding principle; it needs to understand that it cannot begin to think of war only when the fighting starts and that it has to accept war as an integral part of world politics. Therefore, Germany must consider the dialectical possibility of war and plan accordingly in times of crisis and peace alike. Integrated security should, therefore, not only be used as a synonym for ministerial coordination within the Government, but be reflected in a strategic approach that aims to pool the entire spectrum of state resources in such a way that Germany can and wants to credibly demonstrate its strength to others.

Liberal societies are struggling with this understanding. In their world view, cooperation is based on peaceful competition (representing a win-win situation), on

⁷ Scholz 2023.

⁸ Merkel 2014.

compromises to settle disputes and on legal agreements. The historical – not the philosophical – roots of this world view lie in the peaceful socialisation of Europeans as a result of WWII, which was mentioned at the beginning of this publication. One could add the Germans’ ‘true’ strategic mindset, if you like, which is multilateralism. For those who, because of their socialisation, perceive international disputes – be they more or less serious – as an invitation to reach a compromise, concessions are a decisive and obvious means of choice. However, when it comes to power, people thinking this way commit a serious and fundamental error.

For aggressors, who are usually not perceived as such by liberal states for a long time, have a completely different view on the nature of concessions. As regards the spiral theory – which, from my point of view, is frequently cited but rarely understood – one main point of Robert Jervis’ criticism is precisely this: aggressors regard any concessions made to them as the result of fear, and therefore as signs of weakness, especially because from the aggressors’ perspective, they had long before made their intentions obvious.⁹ This pattern fits well with the rulers of Russia and China, while Western states – Germany especially – have failed to perceive these countries correctly and must now deal with the consequences.

Germany’s strategists should, therefore, rely on their country’s material strength as a building block for deterrence and consider its intrinsic moral strength as a tool to hone their perception in order to understand the fundamentals of and prerequisites for the state’s survival. This new level of perception should then become entrenched in a cultural awareness that develops a strategic understanding of one’s environment and treats it with a measure of caution.

Lawrence Freedman describes this dialectic concisely as follows:

Yet, and this may only be a matter of temperament, there does tend to be a dark side to the strategic imagination that picks up intimations of disorder at times of stability, that senses the fragility of human institutions even while striving to reinforce them, that cannot stop thinking of war while promoting peace.¹⁰

The above has not happened in Germany so far – at least, not officially. This can be seen from the fact that while the external shock caused by the events of 24 February 2022 revealed the need for radical action and resulted in some frenetic activity in Germany, the Government had already formed a different perception of its priorities by the time Germany’s tank debate began six months later.

In order to address the question of how relevant the aforementioned key premises are for small to medium-sized states, I would like to add the following: without membership in an alliance, credible outward strength, and thus deterrence, is difficult to achieve. The downside becomes clear immediately: projecting one’s own lack of deterrence capability and intrinsic strength into an alliance weakens the alliance’s credibility from within. Potential opponents are aware of the above and try to take advantage of such situations in any way possible, playing with a central emotion – fear.

⁹ Jervis 2017b: chapter 3.

¹⁰ Freedman 2019: 418.

The Operational and Discursive Use of the Term *Escalation*

In order to further illustrate the above analysis and observations, this chapter will discuss the lately popular term *escalation* and its operational and discursive use.

From a German perspective, the question of escalation became particularly prominent in the recent past whenever Putin threatened to use nuclear weapons. Most recently in the Taurus debate, Chancellor Scholz made it clear that Germany could not act like France or the UK because unlike them, his country lacked nuclear weapons. He believed a potential delivery of Taurus missiles to Ukraine would involve the risk of escalating the war, which in turn might lead Russia to use nuclear weapons against Germany. This is why Germany has ruled out the provision of Taurus missiles for now and for the future.

Putin had thus achieved a double success. Firstly, he prevented Germany from supplying Taurus missiles by threatening to use nuclear weapons, thereby influencing the events on the conventional battlefield to his advantage. Secondly, Putin managed to manipulate Chancellor Scholz's fear of escalation in such a way that his implied threat of a nuclear strike led the latter to believe that Russia might actually attack one of NATO's members with nuclear weapons. If I am not mistaken, this reveals the true extent of Putin's success: he had tricked Chancellor Scholz into believing that the logic of the Alliance was no longer valid. In reality, however, it is *impossible* for Putin to attack a single NATO member without having to expect a response by the entire Alliance.

In view of the fact that Germany's security perception is so flawed, it seems worthwhile to take a closer look at the idea of escalation, for which Lawrence Freedman's 'The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy' is a very good starting point.¹¹ The term *escalation* emerged in the nuclear discussions of the 1950s and 1960s. In essence, these discussions revolved around the assumption that any nuclear confrontation initially thought of as a limited one would inevitably lead to a full-blown war. The image of a lift – or *escalator* – was used to grasp the suspected danger that people would lose control: once they stepped on the escalator, they had no choice but to go up. This idea of an automatic system emerged in view of the predictable clashes and miscalculations that would inevitably drive the escalation to its climax.

Herman Kahn criticised this idea of escalation, his main point being that the escalator's movement could be controlled after all. He therefore introduced the *ladder of escalation*. Kahn said that it was up to the actors themselves to decide whether they wanted to go up or down the rungs or stay where they were, but that the process was not a linear one. The escalation ladder model thus applied the idea of non-linearity to the competition of those risking a nuclear confrontation.

As the discussion evolved further, Kahn and others noticed, however, that adversaries might have completely different ladders in mind which they perceived and used differently. Consequently, the ladder could not serve as a suitable means of communication between them.

As regards the overarching question of how to improve Germany's perception of international politics based on the underlying key security premises, the following can be concluded:

¹¹ Freedman 2019.

- Firstly, escalation should no longer be understood as if, due to the linear automatic nature implied in the concept, certain conventional weapon deliveries would inevitably and directly result in a nuclear ‘Armageddon’. This logic of escalation has been ingrained in the minds of important German decision-makers. But the country that gave birth to Clausewitz should know that wars never evolve in a linear way.
- Secondly, Kahn’s realisation that more than one ladder of escalation exists allows for the possibility of intentionally manipulating an adversary’s perception in order to achieve an objective that is different from the one communicated. So far, Putin has succeeded very well in the above: all his nuclear threats were followed by German concessions such as protracting decision-making processes – to which Putin never responded by not acting – or not delivering important military materiel such as the Taurus missiles. Obviously, this logic works very well.
- And last but not least, instead of supposing that ‘Armageddon’ is on the doorstep, German Government officials should take a more realistic approach to considering what options Putin had available in the respective situation and what options are still at his disposal. Then they would see that, certainly, there has always been the possibility of a nuclear strike. But is this also the most probable scenario?

Conclusion

In summary, the following can be stated: Germany should recognise the drive for power that states have as an inherent feature of international politics and accept war as a permanent means of politics. This is the only way for Germany to avoid the risk of being deceived by its own filter of perception, which excludes the possibility of war. Finally, Germany should counter the anarchy of world politics – something that is systemically inevitable – by showing deterrent strength within and on behalf of NATO. As for the matter of concessions, Germany should realise that aggressors regard them as a result of fear, and therefore as (signs of) weakness – because from the aggressors’ perspective, they had long before made their intentions clear. Thus, any apparent willingness on our part to offer concessions to an aggressor will only serve to encourage them in their pursuits.

If the German Government makes an authentic effort to embrace these insights in a strategic culture, it will also be perceived as authentic – by its own citizens and by friends and foes alike.

Germany might fail to adopt a strategic culture or continue to delay this process, but this will do nothing to change the logics of the ‘different world’. On the contrary: the antagonists of the West will predictably, relentlessly and unscrupulously exploit these shortcomings.

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