

The Security Times

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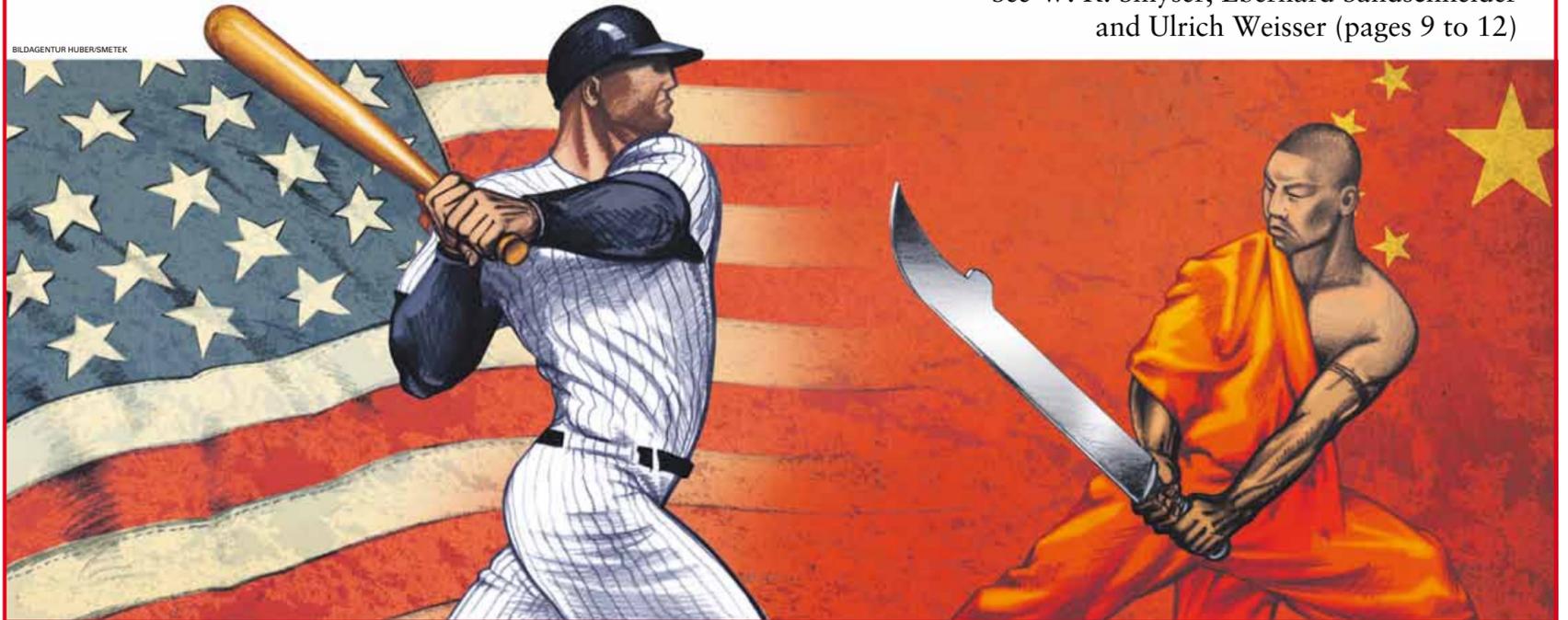
February 2012

Munich, Germany

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The US and China compete for supremacy in the Asia-Pacific

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Wanted: leadership

US and European leaders are shrinking defense outlay as they try to restore economic strength. This creates challenges | By Theo Sommer

The French historian Jacques Bainville once observed that “things have never gone well.” But at the beginning of 2012, they look grimmer than in times Bainville might have considered normal. At one and the same time, we are experiencing a tectonic change of the old world order, a crisis of global governance and governability as well as a crisis of Western capitalism. We live in a setting of international uncertainty and insecurity.

The worst aspect of this jarring state of affairs is that no one seems to be in charge, willing and able to lead, and capable of presenting a strategic vision equal to the challenges we face. We seem to be heading toward “no-one’s world,” says Charles Kupchan, who teaches International Relations at Georgetown University – “a world without a dominant center or model.” *Time*’s Fareed Zakaria agrees: In his view, the post-American world “is characterized by the absence of great powers rather than by their presence.” A short glance around the globe corroborates this judgement.

The United States has lost its capacity to determine the course of history more or less alone. It will remain preeminent for decades to come, but it will no longer be predominant. The effectiveness, stability and predictability of the American political process have been dramatically weakened by sustained internal paralysis.

Rising national debt and shockingly high budget deficits undermine an economy that has lost its capitalist luster in two global crises caused by Wall Street’s irrational exuberance and infectious greed. The moral superiority of the US, shredded by Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, no longer carries much weight. At the same time, the widening rift between Rich America and Poor America forebodes serious convulsions of the country’s social order.

Europe is not in much better shape than the United States. Its leaders meet and meet, but their never-ending succession of summits produces at best piecemeal progress toward a solution of Euroland’s debt crisis. So far, the outcome of all their summitry has been unsatisfactory and insufficient. As long as this crisis lingers – and it may continue for quite some time – the European Union will be unable to play an influential role in world politics.

It is no surprise that the Obama administration keeps claiming global leadership for the US as a kind of latter-day manifest

destiny. The President and his secretary of defense made no bones about this when they presented the Pentagon’s new defense guidelines. Yet in the same breath they proclaimed that after a decade of costly wars, it is time to shrink defense outlays, to focus on nation-building at home and to concentrate the US military effort on the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East – in plain English, on rising China and on nuclearizing Iran.

The new priorities push Europe onto the backburner. Two of the four US combat brigades stationed there will be withdrawn. In fact, the administration

to getting ambitions, commitments and capabilities back into balance.

Such an outcome seems more likely as the protracted economic crisis has all Western nations firmly in its grip. “The single biggest threat to our national security is our debt” – the view of Admiral Michael Mullen, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, is widely shared by political and military leaders elsewhere. They all accord priority to the task of domesticating predatory capitalism, of rekindling economic growth and creating jobs for millions, especially for the young generation. They have to repair the broken-down financial systems and rescue the world from a prolonged recession, if not depression.

Remembering the wave of protests that shook societies around the entire globe last year, from the *anagaktismenoi* in Greece, Spain’s *indignados* and the Occupy Wall Street activists to the protesters in restive Russia and

China, leaders realize that they must leave no stone unturned to crank up their ailing economies. If they fail, the danger is not only that disenchantment with democracy, already mirrored in the rise of right-wing populism most everywhere, will assume dangerous dimensions.

The financial crisis has so far swept three European prime ministers – George Papandreou, Silvio Berlusconi, José Zapatero – out of office. If it festers on, others are bound to follow them into political oblivion. And the bedrock on which democracy is based may crack.

Failure to restore the health of America’s and Europe’s economies will also undermine the capacity to secure their interests in a profoundly changing world. As President Obama formulated it in his recent Pentagon address: “We have to renew our economic strength here at home, which is the foundation of our strength around the world.” It’s a sound recipe for everybody.

Understandably, the Western nations are currently fixated on the financial and economic crisis. It forces them to pare back their defense expenditure. But the outside world is full of dangers, some of them clear and present, others emerging, others again perhaps only imagined. Even the World Economic Forum, meeting in Davos last week, made a point of listing ten geopolitical threats in an inventory of fifty potential risks looming on the horizon. They were: failing states, proliferation

“The USA has lost its capacity to determine the course of history alone. It will remain preeminent for decades – but will no longer be predominant.”

expects the Europeans to take up some of the slack. Burden sharing is once again an urgent topic.

The trouble is, of course, that the European states are neither able nor especially willing to assume new responsibilities – and so far they do not see any strategic necessity either. All of them are in the midst of a fundamental transformation of their armed forces. In essence, this transformation boils down to drastic manpower and budget cuts.

Theo Sommer is executive editor of “The Security Times” and “The Atlantic Times” and Editor-at-Large of the German weekly DIE ZEIT.



ARCHIVE

Defense reform

Some experts are already concerned about a “demilitarization of Europe.” As each nation goes about transformation in quite different ways and without paying much attention to what their partners are doing, programs for “pooling and sharing” assets remain mostly unrealized. For the same reason, there are only dim prospects for the kind of extensive burden-sharing desired by the Americans. NATO members had better get used to the idea that, absent any existential threat, burden-shedding rather than burden-sharing may prove the key

Security in an era of global change

By Wolfgang Ischinger

The Munich Security Conference (MSC) has established itself globally as a unique forum for decision-makers in the field of foreign and security policy. I am delighted to welcome more than 70 government delegations from all over the world, heads of state and government, foreign and defense ministers, ambassadors, military officers, academic experts, as well as CEOs and civil society representatives to this year’s conference.

Ten years after 9/11, a decade of large military engagements is coming to an end. Increasingly, non-military factors will shape the global security debate. As the Eurasia Group’s Top Risks 2012 report puts it, today economics drives geopolitics, while politics is driving the economy – and global leadership is in short supply.



Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger is Chairman of the Munich Security Conference.

PRIVATE

This is why 2012 promises to be a particularly challenging and interesting year in global security. The MSC motto this year is “Securing peace in a year of major geopolitical shifts and uncertainties.” The dynamic developments in the Asia-Pacific region will continue to produce changes in global power patterns. The EU and the Eurozone must face critical questions about their identity, their purpose and policies, and their cohesion. Germany must learn to live with its new and growing central role in overcoming the debt crisis. And many Arab countries are facing a difficult mix of reform, transition, insecurity, and hope. We will discuss these challenges, but also energy, resource, climate and cyber security.

Of course, traditional topics of Euro-Atlantic security will not be ignored, including the continuing challenges in the relationship between NATO and Russia, missile defense among them, as well as perspectives of “Smart Defense” and of defense pooling and sharing in NATO and in the EU. In fact, the EASI Commission will unveil its proposals for a comprehensive Euro-Atlantic Security Community.

I wish all participants a creative and productive conference! ■

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of weapons of mass destruction, organized crime, failure of diplomatic conflict resolution, global governance failure, militarization of space, entrenched corruption, terrorism, resource rivalry and illicit trade.

Professionals will find this list pretty academic. The threats they deal with are far more concrete: The ambiguity of Iran's nuclear program, for instance; the uncertainty about nuclear North Korea after the leadership change in Pyongyang; the fragility of nuclear Pakistan.

The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has just moved the minute hand on its Doomsday Clock one minute closer to midnight. In the face of nearly 20,000 nuclear weapons still in the arsenals of nine nuclear-armed states, and stagnating efforts to reduce this dangerous stockpile, the Bulletin states: "The world is playing with the explosive potential of a million suns and a fire that will not go out." Some will consider this Manichean poetry – but there is no doubt that a preventive Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear development centers could inflame the entire Middle East in the very near future.

And there are other hotbeds of potential conflict: Kashmir, Taiwan, the 38th parallel on the Korean peninsula. The Arab-Israeli conflict is farther from

Wanted: leadership

resolution than before the Arab Spring, as democratic elections seem to empower not pragmatic secularists but Islamists. Unrest is spreading in the countries of Central Asia, there are tensions around Somalia, armed clashes between the two Sudans. Piracy threatens vital trade routes around the Horn of Africa and in the Strait of Malacca. Above and beyond these flashpoints lurk such mega-threats as climate change, energy insecurity, the vulnerability of our cyber systems.

There can be no doubt that our old assumptions about security and stability no longer hold. A reappraisal is overdue. Which are the most dangerous threats we confront in the – geographically never defined – "euro-Atlantic area?" What can – and must – NATO do about them? Where can – and should – it look the other way? Does it have the means to act when action is imperative? Will it, depending on the contingency at hand, crumble into a slew of divergent "coalitions of the willing" helping themselves to the common toolbox – or will it remain a unified alliance? And is it really advisable to adapt NATO's mission to the new geopolitical givens without ever submitting the issue to our parliaments for approval?

So far, the alliance has been kicking the can down the road, burying its indecision in verbose, though vague doctrinal documents. The idea of an "enlarged West" has not been spelled out. Nor has the concept of "smart defense" outgrown the stage of postulation, planning and propagandizing.

On the military side, the alliance has technically adjusted to the changed security environment. On the political side, however, it has failed to conduct a candid debate about its purpose, its goals and its mission in our hyper-connected yet fragile world. One cannot help thinking that the time has come to convene another blue ribbon council like the Harmel Commission, whose pivotal report in 1967 set up the guidepost which pointed the way for NATO to prevail in the Cold War. ■



Present at the creation:
US Secretary of State Dean Acheson
signing the NATO Treaty on April 4, 1949.
To his left President Harry Truman (top).



Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO Secretary General.

Last year, I spoke at the Munich Security Conference about NATO's busy agenda and the challenge of building security in an age of austerity. Back then, no one could have predicted that the Alliance would soon respond to the historic call by the United Nations Security Council to protect the people of Libya. But that is what we did – and with great success. Operation Unified Protector was another strong demonstration of NATO's ability to deliver real security.

For over sixty years, NATO has successfully protected our populations and our principles, and helped to provide security and stability across the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond. It has been a wise investment that has delivered security dividends year after year.

At our next NATO Summit, in Chicago in May, the Allies will make important decisions for stability in Afghanistan, NATO's military capabilities, and strengthening our partnerships across the globe. These decisions will help ensure that the Alliance can continue to deliver security for many decades to come.

With over 130,000 troops, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan remains our most

defend European Allies' populations, territory and forces against the growing threat posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles. This project embodies transatlantic solidarity, and it is Smart Defense at its best.

We have already made considerable progress. Along with a prominent and phased US contribution, several Allies have announced their own important contributions that will be gradually brought together under a NATO command and control system. We have already conducted several successful tests. And I expect the initial components of this key capability for NATO to be in place by the time of our Chicago Summit.

I hope we can also continue forging a truly strategic NATO-Russia partnership. Today, the Alliance and Russia are working together to bring stability to Afghanistan, and to curb the flood of narcotics out of the country. We are countering terrorism in our subways and in our airspace. And we are combating piracy off the Horn of Africa. But there clearly is much more that we can do.

At the Lisbon summit, NATO and Russia agreed to move forward on missile defense cooperation. Although we have made less progress than I had hoped, I continue to believe this is a

Our mission is succeeding

Looking forward to NATO's Chicago Summit in May

By Anders Fogh Rasmussen

important mission. Fifty Allies and partners are determined to ensure the country will never again be a base for global terrorism. This is the biggest coalition in history. And our mission is succeeding. The transition of our security responsibilities to the Afghan authorities is well on track to be completed by the end of 2014.

In the coming months, more than half of the Afghan population will see their own soldiers and policemen taking the lead for their security. As Afghan security forces grow more confident and capable, our role will continue to evolve into one of support, training and mentoring. And the Chicago Summit will show our commitment to a long-term partnership with Afghanistan, together with the whole international community, beyond 2014.

Also at Chicago, we will take measures to improve our capabilities. During our operation in Libya last year, European Allies and Canada took the lead and provided most of the assets, while the United States deployed critical

“NATO will send a strong signal that cooperation is not a luxury, but a necessity.”

assets, such as drones, precision-guided munitions and air-to-air refueling. If we want to respond effectively to the challenges of the future, we need such capabilities to be available more widely among more Allies.

In the current economic climate, delivering these expensive capabilities is not easy. But it can be done. As I noted in Munich last year, the answer lies in "Smart Defense": doing better with less by working more closely together. In Chicago, I expect the Allies to deliver on a range of concrete projects, and to commit to Smart Defense as a long-term strategy for improving our capabilities

At our last summit, in Lisbon in November of 2010, we agreed to develop a NATO capability to

very promising area for cooperation. It makes sense practically, militarily and politically. And it could radically change the dynamics of the NATO-Russia relationship for the better.

Finally, NATO is determined to develop its vast network of partnerships spanning five continents. Our Libya operation would not have been possible without the political and operational support of our partners in the region and beyond. In Afghanistan, 22 partners have troops or trainers on the ground right now. And in Kosovo, seven partner nations operate shoulder-to-shoulder with NATO forces, led by Germany.

In Chicago, we will meet with partner nations from across the world to recognize their valuable contribution to our shared security. It will send a strong signal

that cooperation is not a luxury, but a necessity. And that NATO is fully committed to it.

Our Chicago Summit comes at a crucial time. We have to make NATO fit to face future security challenges while we deal with the current economic crisis.

To do so, we will reinforce the unique and indispensable bond between North America and Europe, which is the bedrock of our security. We will confirm our enduring commitment to Afghanistan. We will agree on a package of concrete projects and make Smart Defense our long-term capability strategy. And we will enhance our consultation and cooperation with our many partners across the globe.

In sum, Chicago will showcase an Alliance that is committed, capable and connected: committed to transatlantic solidarity and cooperation; capable of dealing with the security challenges of the future; and connected with its partner nations and the rest of the international community. ■

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Times Media GmbH
Tempelhofer Ufer 23-24
10963 Berlin, Germany
www.times-media.de
info@times-media.de

Phone +49 30-2150-5400
Fax +49 30-2150-5447

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At the beginning of 2012, the international community is facing many challenges. The financial crisis, the public debt crisis and the development of the economy are determining the political agenda in capitals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Despite the absolute need to concentrate on resolving these crises, we will not be granted a reprieve by the global security situation. The course of developments in the Arab world, which remains unpredictable, Iran's almost unchecked progress on the way to becoming a nuclear power and the increasing challenges in cyberspace are examples of the complex and dynamic security environment of today and tomorrow. Ensuring security in a responsible way today necessitates the ability to react simultaneously and concurrently to multiple challenges.

Security is a country's primary responsibility. The current financial and public debt crises have shown us more clearly than ever before that there can be no economic prosperity without security and conversely, no security without economic prosperity. Healthy state finances are a fundamental prerequisite for stability and security. At the same time, economic and social prosperity are dependent on protection from aggression, be it of a military, political or economic nature.

Crises, irrespective of their nature, lead to imbalances and instability. Instability in turn creates uncertainty and distrust. Hence, resolving crises is first of all a matter of (re-)establishing stability and thus creating a basis for security. Every sustainably effective national strategy must strike a balance between a nation's economic resources and its domestic policy as well as foreign and security policy commitments.

As Europe's most populous country and strongest national economy and the world's third largest export nation, Germany is not only particularly dependent on international stability, but also contributes substantially to it. As a strong nation in the center of Europe, it is in our own interest to maintain this stability.

This applies to the financial markets, the European Monetary Union and the international system of states. For this reason Germany plays a leading role in tackling the European sovereign debt crisis.

20 Years after the end of the Cold War, Germany is an equal partner in the UN, NATO and the EU. It is in our own interest and it is our partners' expectation that we take responsibility for our own security and that of our partners. For Germany this means shouldering responsibility together with our European partners for security in Europe and beyond.

Responsible, reliable, predictable

“Germany will make its contribution to a peaceful world” | By Thomas de Maizière



“Side by side, we are fighting for peace in Afghanistan.”
Bundeswehr troops on a mine-clearing mission near Kunduz.

PICTURE: ALLIANCE/DAVID MAURIZIO GAMBARRINI

Our engagement in the Balkans is one example of this. Furthermore, we want, together with our European partners, to contain and mitigate at an early stage crises and conflicts, which endanger our security and the security of our allies. This also means helping to bring to bear values such as freedom, human rights and the rule of law.

Germany is honoring its international responsibility to maintain peace, security and prosperity in the world in an active way. With the Bundeswehr, we are making a valuable contribution, 365 days a year, as the lead nation in northern Afghanistan, fighting piracy off the Horn of Africa and stabilizing Kosovo.

Together with our partners, we want to prepare ourselves in the best possible manner for future challenges. This includes both the readiness and the willingness to implement far-reaching reforms. National debt brakes, a more integrated European financial

policy and the reorientation of our armed forces are as much a part of it as the support for pooling and sharing initiatives and the transformation of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Only those who are willing and able to adapt in an evolutionary

the Weimar Triangle, which aim at stronger cooperation. As part of the Smart Defense Initiative we advance projects that aim to close capability gaps, such as in air and maritime surveillance.

In a globalized and networked world, the only way to address

Germany promotes the strengthening of NATO and the EU as well as a strategic cooperation between the two organizations and the consolidation of partnerships with third party countries.

The transatlantic partnership and a free and united Europe are the unshakable foundation of our foreign and security policy. Europe and the United States of America may be different with regard to their political cultures and their geostrategic positions. What unites us, however, is much stronger – our common values, our shared interests as well as our common history.

NATO will remain the most successful alliance in the world. With its new Strategic Concept adopted at the Lisbon Summit in 2010, it underlines its value as a security alliance.

With regard to its values, interests and goals, there is no other region that resembles Europe in

the way North America does. Side by side, we are fighting for peace in Afghanistan. Together, we are incessantly working toward a solution in the Middle East peace process. Jointly, we represent democracy and human rights.



Thomas de Maizière is the German Minister of Defense.

Germany

Let us not forget: transatlantic trade will remain one of the most significant economic relationships on a global level in the foreseeable future. Many future issues require a joint response: climate change, energy supply, free trade routes and access to resources are only some examples of the challenges that will keep us busy in the years to come. Hand in hand, we are working to strengthen the North Atlantic Alliance.

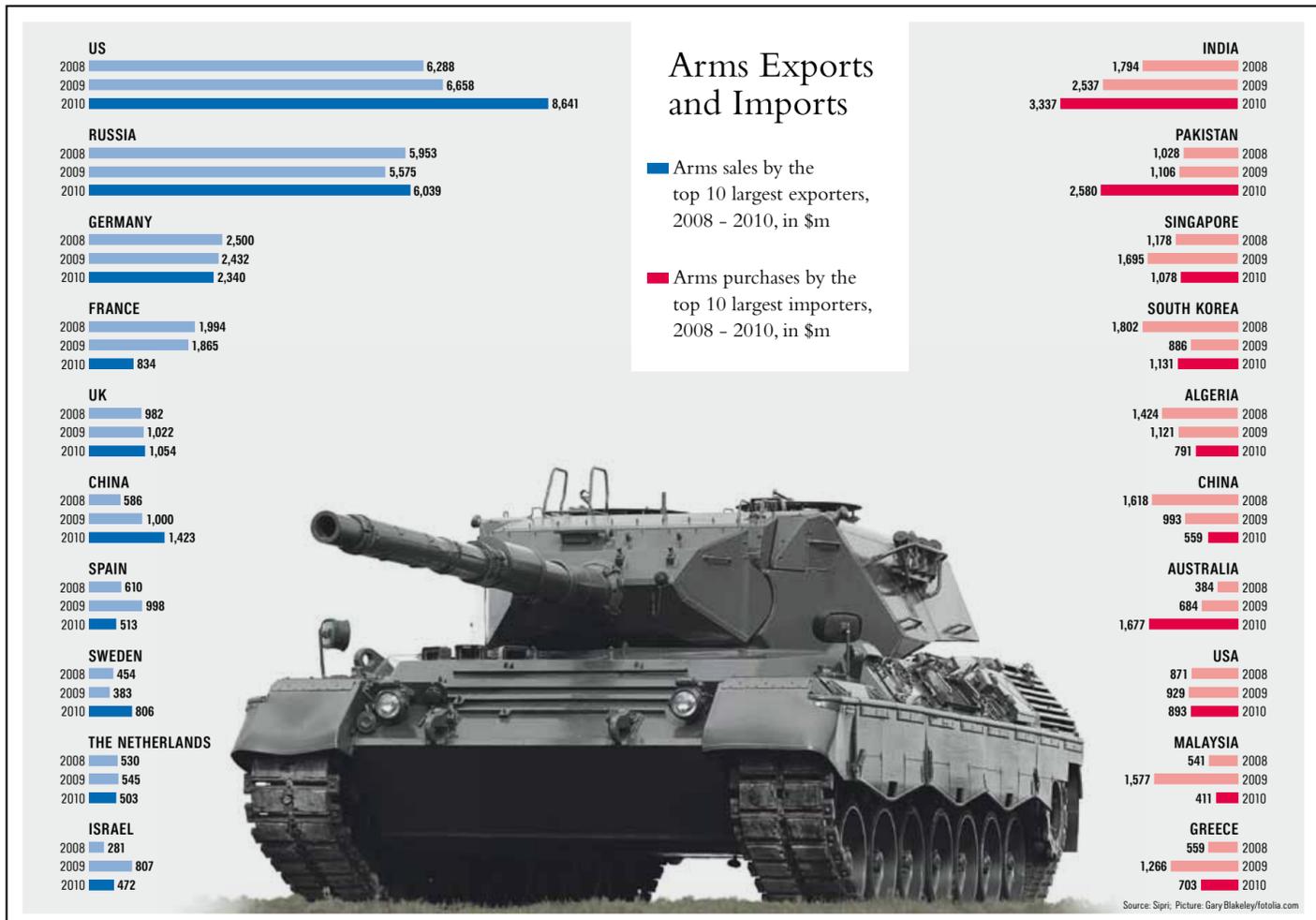
There is no doubt that this relationship has changed in recent years. For a long time, Europe – and particularly Germany – has benefited from the United States' solidarity with the Alliance. Today, Germany and Europe are required to assume responsibility – for their own security, for the security in their immediate neighborhood and also beyond.

Europe should view the American shift of strategic focus towards Asia as an opportunity. The US and Europe are reliable and trusted, stable and predictable partners for one another, today and in the future. This is what distinguishes us. This is our common strength.

In a changing world, apart from our long-standing partnerships, new partnerships will become increasingly important. The US and Europe actively seek to deepen and consolidate the partnerships in the Asian-Pacific region and the Middle East as well as with countries in Africa and South America. The basis for our actions remains a robust, crisis-proof and future-oriented transatlantic partnership.

Responsible, reliable, predictable as well as value- and interest-oriented, Germany will make its contribution to a peaceful world.

“Europe should view the American shift of strategic focus toward Asia as an opportunity.”



A long and winding road

The Arab world must decide how it wants to move forward | By Volker Perthes

Since the fall of Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak one year ago, it has become evident that the political transformation of the Arab world is a complex, often violent, and protracted process that has only just begun. Many observers like to speak of an "Arab Spring." This concept is much too seasonal, breeding impatience and disappointment rather than making us think about our – Europe's and America's – long-term strategic engagement with the region.

The Arab world still finds itself within the first five minutes of its current historical hour. Four factors seem particularly important to watch, and to take into account, as the Arab revolts enter their second year.

Socio-demographics: The popular uprisings in the Arab World have mainly been the work of the generation between 20 and 35 years of age. This cohort is larger and generally better educated than any previous generation, but it faces diminished social and material opportunities.

So far, the fall of the old regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya has not improved their economic and social situation. Nor are the "2011ers" – the political activists who triggered the revolutions – among the winners of the first elections that have taken place since. We should not be surprised if this group, which has already tasted its own power, sets out to challenge the authorities, even the newly elected authorities.

Europe and the US should support and encourage the transformation of Arab states by providing opportunities for this generation, both with regard to employment and to political participation. We should also realize that comparable socio-demographic developments may occur in other Arab countries. In Saudi Arabia, a generation akin to the 2011ers of Tunisia, Egypt or Syria is still maturing and won't reach its full strength for a couple of years. We



should not be complacent about countries that seem stable today.

The military: In Tunisia and Egypt, the military has played a positive role in the revolts against the old regimes. In Syria and Yemen, further developments will largely depend on decisions by key elements in the military.

In many Arab states, soldiers have enjoyed more trust than governments or other institutions; they were seen as a factor of national unity.

But the military is neither a neutral, nor a democratic actor. As we see in Egypt, the generals want to preserve their interests,

and they have no understanding of modern government or economics. The military is needed to prevent chaos and to protect the transformation toward a new political order. But it is not prepared for the role soldiers are supposed to play in democratic states.

Western governments should neither court nor ignore Arab military leaders. Rather, and without overestimating external influence, NATO's existing dialogue and partnership formats should be used to cautiously engage them. Central and Eastern European NATO members should have a special role here, offering to share their experiences with military reform in the course of political transformation.

Political Islam:

It is likely that more Arab states will become both increasingly democratic and more conservative over the next couple of years. Religious conservatism has

a constituency all over the region. Election results in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco also suggest that Islamist parties are seen as having a greater moral integrity, which counts for a lot in an era of uncertainty. At the same time, the opening and pluralization of the political systems has broadened the spectrum of political Islam itself.

This raises the question of how mainstream Islamist groups and parties like the Muslim Brotherhood will develop in the face of strong political competition from ultra-conservative Saudi-inspired Salafism. Will they move towards the Salafists and lose ground in the political center? Or will they seek pragmatic answers to their countries' social and economic problems in order to establish themselves – akin to Turkey's AKP – as broadly-based conservative parties? Europe and the US ought to seek honest dialogues with mainstream Islamists, and with any new government in the region that emerges from free elections – regardless of its political hue.

Regional geopolitics: The changes in some Arab countries and the ongoing revolts in others have an impact on regional politics. Egypt, Turkey and also Qatar are already playing a more active

role. The Arab League, which for so long has served as a club of autocrats, is being transformed into a regional organization that no longer shies away from the "internal" affairs of member states.

There can be little doubt that such measures as the League has been taking against the regime in Damascus have as much to do with geopolitics as with humanitarian motives. This, too, is nothing to be surprised about. We are witnessing a heightened politicization on all levels: As

territories. But the support of Hamas for such a government will not make the Israeli government any more prepared to reach out to its neighbors; and frustration with the lack of progress in peace talks can easily translate into renewed violence.

The ongoing revolt in Syria and the widely-shared expectation that the Assad regime has reached the final phase of its shelf-life have also initiated a new regional struggle over Syria that involves, among others, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq and Iran.

While Iran is concerned about losing its main ally and foothold in the Levant, the Saudis as well as the US and some European states regard the expected fall of Assad primarily as a chance to weaken Tehran's regional position.

The uprising in Syria is thus directly connected to the struggle for hegemony in the Persian Gulf. This conflict will also

continue to impact on the situation in Bahrain, to the detriment of those who seek peaceful change in that country, probably in Yemen and certainly in Iraq where both domestic conflicts and the competition between Sunnis and Shiites for influence have begun to increase after the withdrawal of US forces.

Western leaders should have learned that simplistic models, such as the distinction between a supposedly "moderate" and a "radical" camp in the Middle East, which guided US policy until the fall of Mubarak, do not actually help us to understand the politics of the region. Consider, among other things, that Iraq, which certainly is an American ally, is also the strongest Arab supporter of the Assad regime in Syria. And Saudi Arabia, the main regional rival of Iran, is the chief backer of Salafism, whose electoral successes trouble liberal and secular forces and quite a few moderate Islamists as well.

What is needed from the US and from Europe is careful crisis management in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; a return to diplomacy rather than escalation with Iran; and active attempts to shape the conditions for a peaceful transition in Syria that spare the country a descent into civil war. ■

“ Europe and the US ought to seek honest dialogues with mainstream Islamists, and with any new government in the region that emerges from free elections – regardless of its political hue. ”

initially local revolts quickly attain a regional dimension and new regimes tend to review their foreign-policy approaches, the interplay between domestic politics and regional geopolitics certainly promises more turbulence. This is particularly so as neither the Israeli-Palestinian conflict nor the struggle over hegemony in the Persian Gulf has moved closer to a solution.



Volker Perthes is the director of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin.

The Arab world

Israel has become more isolated since the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Whoever takes power in Cairo is likely to be more supportive of the Palestinians and tougher on Israel than the old regime. The two Palestinian administrations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip seem to be on a – bumpy – road to reunification. This is happening under popular pressure, and it is a necessary condition for the formation of a government that represents all of the Palestinian



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Promenadeplatz 2-6
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The latest news from Iraq recalls the worst periods of the 2005-2007 civil war that brought the country between the Euphrates and the Tigris to the brink of total collapse. Almost 70 people were killed in attacks on civilians in Baghdad and Nasiriya in early January, and more than 100 were wounded, many seriously.

Hardly a day passes without suicide bombers killing dozens of people. As before the civil war, Sunni terrorists are again trying to provoke the Shiites into retaliation as a way of destabilizing the country as a whole.

Since the end of the US troop withdrawal on Dec. 18, violence has been escalating, the number of dead and wounded rising. It is not yet clear whether this is just a temporary flare-up or a long-term trend. Al-Qaeda is a weakened force in Iraq but it still represents a danger to be taken seriously.

It would be reassuring to know that the government in Baghdad was combating the terrorists with every means at its disposal. Instead, the political class remains caught up in its own struggle for power.

Obviously, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki wants to take advantage of the Americans' withdrawal to neutralize his rivals. During the elections in March 2010, the Iraqi National Movement of the former interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi, won the most seats. But Maliki – whose State of Law coalition came a close second – managed to be reappointed prime minister in late 2011 after marathon negotiations involving concessions to his new partners in a coalition of national unity.

It soon became clear that Maliki was not ready to honor his promises to the secularist and Sunni-dominated Iraqi Islamic Party. Reneging on previous understandings, he prevented his rivals from gaining the ministries of defense and interior. Instead, he expanded his own control over those two portfolios (still with-

Caught in the middle

Iraq could become the battlefield in a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia

By Guido Steinberg



The rate of attacks in Iraq has increased since December last year. This car bombing in Sadr City in Baghdad on Jan. 24, 2012 was one of a series in Shiite areas of the capital.

out ministers), which control the security agencies and the army.

In autumn 2011, a wave of arrests began, mainly targeting former members of the banned Baath Party. When Sunni and secular politicians protested, those detained were accused of planning a putsch.

As a next step, the Maliki government tried to strip politicians belonging to the Iraqi Islamic

Party of power. One case in particular provoked headlines, when Iraqi justice authorities accused the Sunni vice president Tariq al-Hashimi of coordinating death squads. Hashimi fled to Iraqi Kurdistan. In protest, lawmakers from the Iraqi Islamic Party refused to attend cabinet meetings and are boycotting parliament.

An end to the dispute is not in sight. Resistance to Maliki is

Guido Steinberg is a Middle East expert at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

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Iraq

growing, with the two Kurdish parties in his coalition now also feeling hard done-by. Along with the Iraqi Islamic Party, they are threatening to end the governing coalition and topple the prime minister through a vote of no-confidence.

But they lack the necessary majority, and it is still not clear if they can gain the support of Shiite lawmakers for their plan. Right

now, it seems more likely that Maliki will emerge strengthened from the current crisis and will be able to consolidate his power.

Nevertheless, his strategy remains extremely risky. So the danger of renewed civil war cannot be entirely dismissed.

In the Syrian crisis, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states have taken the side of the opposition and are working toward the ouster of the Assad regime. Syria is Iran's most important ally in the Arab world. The protest movement offers Iran's opponents a welcome opportunity to weaken Assad and therefore also to damage Tehran.

Although the Saudis seem to lack the determination to follow through on their convictions by providing major arms deliveries to the Syrian opposition, Iraq has already reacted. Maliki is helping the Assad regime because he fears that a Sunni-ruled Syria making common cause with Saudi Arabia could also support his domestic Sunni opponents. Rumors are circulating in the region about billion-dollar payments to the embattled dictator in Damascus.

If Assad falls anyway, the balance of power in Iraq could change again. Iraq could become the battlefield in a proxy war between the Iranian and the Saudi camps in the Middle East.

Iraq, like the rest of the Middle East, has yet to demonstrate that Arabs can create democratically constituted pluralist social and state orders, in which the differences and contradictions between the various tribes, sects and parties can be bridged peacefully by compromise instead of confrontation.

Iraq is a long way from that goal. The coalition of Sunnis and Shiites now only exists on paper. Baghdad is experiencing one outbreak of violence after another. Once again, Iraq threatens to sink into the swamp of sectarianism and factional division. Who knows whether it will ever achieve unity and domestic peace? ■

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