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## **WAR AND THE DECEPTIVE ARROGANCE OF GREAT POWERS**

Keynote Speech

International Conference

*Berlin Wall 33 – 'In the Wake of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict'*

**Academy for Cultural Diplomacy**

Deutscher Bundestag / German Parliament

Berlin, 10 November 2022

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**I.P.O. ONLINE PAPERS**

**Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2022**

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Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to begin with an afterthought on the occasion that brings us together in this august building dedicated to *The German People*. We are commemorating today the *collapse of a wall* – an event that symbolized the end of the division of Europe – and we do so at a moment, in a year, when a *new wall* appears to rise on our continent and in the minds of its peoples, a wall which again divides countries and their citizens along spheres of interest. A new East-West conflict seems to take shape that affects the entire world and poses the threat of a major conflagration, a risk not faced by humanity since the Cuban Missile Crisis sixty years ago.

Though the war in Ukraine is not the only cause of this geopolitical development, it is its most dramatic expression and consequence. *This conflict did not erupt out of nowhere*. There is an uninterrupted legacy of great power rivalry in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The global power struggle, a symptom of the collective greed for power, has always been accompanied by what I call the deceptive – and delusional – *arrogance of the great powers* (for which a more adequate German term would be “Übermut,” because it also means the overbearing self-confidence of powers and their leaders). The examples abound, also in the recent history of international relations. We just need to remember the sequence of humiliating retreats from Afghanistan (1989: of the Soviet Union; 2021: of the United States). Looking back further in history, one may contemplate Napoleon’s invasion of Russia and his subsequent flight from Moscow under circumstances of panic and chaos, epically described by Leo Tolstoi in “War and Peace.” Despite the cultural boycott of everything Russian, this is highly recommended reading especially now, in 2022.

It is as if the lessons of history are never learned. The greed for power, accompanied by over-confidence and a lack of self-restraint, again and again has been at the roots of the peculiar irrationality of collective behavior. To a considerable extent, this also appears to be at the origin of the present conflict in and over Ukraine, which, from the outset, has also been a proxy war between the United States and the collective West on the one side and Russia on the other. The geopolitical escalation that preceded the outbreak of hostilities – namely Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – was fueled by a struggle for power that triggered a chain of “unintended consequences.”

On the Western side, it was over-confidence – after the events of 1989 and the end of the Cold War – that nurtured a kind of triumphalism and false eschatological pathos in the

proclamations of a so-called “New World Order.” Francis Fukuyama’s announcement of the “End of History” was indeed – as we can say in hindsight – the most spectacular misdiagnosis upon the end of the bipolar order that had shaped the world since World War II. In the wake of those proclamations, the military interventionism in the two decades around the turn of the millennium and the steady expansion of strategic influence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization towards the east have profoundly destabilized regional order in the wider Europe. In spite of the fundamental change in the balance of power, indeed of its collapse (to the benefit of the West), the adversarial mindset of the Cold War, embodied in the earlier policy of “containment” of the Soviet Union, prevailed also in the new geopolitical context.

The analysis of NATO expansion towards the east would indeed make a perfect case study of great power arrogance. Because – unlike Fukuyama’s diagnosis – it was a sober and precise prediction, I would like to quote here in more detail the warning words of the main architect of the policy of containment, George F. Kennan, US Ambassador to the Soviet Union after World War II and 1<sup>st</sup> Director of Policy Planning under President Truman. Commenting on the plans for NATO expansion, Kennan, in an article published in 1997 in the *New York Times*,<sup>1</sup> bluntly stated “that expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era.” “Such a decision,” he continued, “may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.” He further said that such a move would be “doubly unfortunate considering the total lack of any necessity for this move.” As we now must admit, Kennan’s warning was a premonition of the things to come. Collective hubris after victory in the Cold War had prevailed over the caution of an elder statesman.

For the historical record, one may add here that Russia considered NATO expansion as a breach of confidence. In an interview for the German *Bild* newspaper in 2009, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, said “that Western Germany, the United States and other powers had pledged after Germany’s reunification in 1990 that ‘NATO would not move a centimeter to the east’.”<sup>2</sup> The Gorbachev Foundation’s report on the

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<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times*, February 5, 1997, Section A, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> “Gorbachev blasts NATO eastward expansion.” News release published by the Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, 2 April 2009, [en.rian.ru // 02.04.2009](http://en.rian.ru//02.04.2009); available at [www.gory.ru/en/presscenter/publication/show\\_26613](http://www.gory.ru/en/presscenter/publication/show_26613), last visited 9 October 2022.

interview (which was not fully published by *Bild*) further reads: “Gorbachev said the Americans had failed to fulfill the promise.” My conversations with President Gorbachev at an international peace conference in Istanbul in December 2012<sup>3</sup> confirmed this interpretation of events by the former Soviet leader, the chief architect of *perestroika* and of peaceful dialogue with the West.

More recently, in a report issued in 2019, entitled “Overextending and Unbalancing Russia,”<sup>4</sup> the RAND Corporation, a think tank established in 1948 by Douglas Aircraft Company to provide research to the United States Armed Forces, suggested as one of several policy options that the “United States might goad Russia into a costly arms race by breaking out of the nuclear arms control regime.” It is hard to imagine a strategic approach that would be more confrontational and peace-threatening than this “cost-imposing measure,” to use the terminology of the RAND report. It is obvious that such a strategic mindset – almost unavoidably – provoked a new cold war confrontation with Russia which is now playing out in Ukraine, and which may trigger further global repercussions due to the geopolitical positioning of the collective West.

Also, we honestly must admit that the conflict did not start in 2022. There is a history of meddling in Ukrainian affairs even since before the dramatic events of the Euro-Maidan around the turn of 2013-2014 and the “Maidan Revolution” (or: “Revolution of Dignity,” as it is called in Ukraine) in February 2014, and the subsequent unconstitutional change (overthrow) of government on the details of which there is no time here to comment; and there is a history of extreme nationalist sentiments, of suppression of the Russian language in Ukraine, and of the continued non-implementation of the Minsk II Agreement of 2015 concerning constitutional measures that would secure the rights of the people in the Russian-speaking territories in the east of the country.

On the Russian side too, deceptive great power arrogance has been obvious all along in the nurturing of a kind of imperial nostalgia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a dream that could not – and cannot – be fulfilled under the prevailing geopolitical circumstances. The apparent illusion, on the part of Russia, about the consequences of challenging the post-Cold War status quo in Ukraine has led to a dangerous escalation of an initially domestic conflict. The draft “Treaty” and draft “Agreement” submitted, on 17

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<sup>3</sup> Conference of the *New Policy Forum on the Middle East and the Mediterranean*, convened by former Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz, Istanbul, 13-14 December 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Rand Corporation, *Brief*, “Overextending and Unbalancing Russia: Assessing the Impact of Cost-imposing Options.” 2019, [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

December 2021, by Russia to the United States and NATO respectively actually were a kind of ultimatum to the Western side of which Russia was aware that it would be rejected. The tactical move – after a long stalemate over NATO expansion – was based on a self-delusional assessment of Russia’s position and capacity to counter the Western reaction to military intervention in Ukraine. Labeling the war, conducted in violation of the UN Charter, as a “special military operation” was another expression of denial of reality typical of great power arrogance. Turkey, when making the necessary statutory determination under the Montreux Convention concerning navigation in the Straits, was not impressed by this definition and identified the hostilities in Ukraine as “war” in the meaning of the Convention. Accordingly, Turkey closed the Straits to the warships of the two belligerent powers.

Furthermore, when on 21 February 2022 President Vladimir Putin convened a meeting of the Russian Security Council to consult with the members about “recognition” of the secessionist territories in Eastern Ukraine as sovereign states, he completely ignored – for everybody to see (the meeting was broadcast live on Russian TV) – the doubts and reservations of at least two members of the Council, including the Chief of Foreign Intelligence who suggested that Russia should still wait a few more days before such a fateful step, and should try to negotiate. The President treated those who albeit timidly suggested a more cautious approach like schoolboys and brusquely confronted them with a yes or no option, with nothing in between – another symptom of deceptive arrogance of great power rule.

However, when we try to grasp the dynamics of a conflict such as the war in and over Ukraine – indeed a proxy war, or struggle for geopolitical repositioning, there is no simple scheme of black and white, or of good versus evil, and even less so when we look at the “military record” of the protagonists. Vilification of the opponent may be a common feature of armed conflict, but it blurs the vision and weakens strategic assessment on both sides, and it narrows the options for compromise based on a rational balancing of risks and interests.

*War could have been avoided* if both sides kept to the parameters of compromise they were able to agree upon in Minsk, in 2015. Should Ukraine, encouraged by the leaders of Germany and France, have implemented the specific autonomy provisions of Minsk II for the Russian-majority regions in the east of the country, the gradual escalation over these long seven years from a regional towards a full-scale international conflict might have been

prevented. By not reigning in extremist nationalist groups such as the Azov Battalion and by persistently refusing implementation of Minsk II, Ukraine gave Russia not a *justification*, but a *pretext* to invade. To the credit of President Zelenskyy, it must be said, however, that early on in his term he tried to convince the Azov leaders to keep out of politics. He did not succeed.

Though it sounds almost like a platitude, it is geopolitical common sense to call upon the parties to return to the negotiating table and to seek a compromise, on the basis of the points raised in the earlier talks on the Belarus-Ukraine border and in Istanbul. Unfortunately, a resumption of negotiations will be much more difficult now because of Russia's declaration concerning the incorporation of the Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in the eastern border region. This happened in the vacuum left by the suspended negotiations under Turkish mediation where Ukraine had presented a constructive ten-point "Istanbul Communiqué" on 29 March 2022. The proposals would, *inter alia*, have included permanent neutrality of Ukraine backed up by international security guarantees.

#### *What way forward?*

Because ending the war by way of a military defeat of Russia, the strongest nuclear power as of today, is neither a realistic prospect in terms of geopolitics nor a responsible option in terms of morality, the only reasonable and prudent approach will be a negotiated balancing of the conflicting interests at the domestic, bilateral and international levels. With the help of honest brokers such as Turkey, the antagonists should agree on an overall framework of principles that form part of today's global consensus, expressed in the Charter of the United Nations and other international covenants of which both states are parties.

Domestically and bilaterally, a sustainable solution needs to be based on *democratic inclusion*, i. e. on the equal participation of all national minorities in the political process in Ukraine. This would have to include implementation of the "package of measures" agreed upon in Minsk concerning recognition of the Russian language and local self-rule in the eastern border provinces. It is worthy of note that the "measures" attached to the Minsk II agreement<sup>5</sup> resemble in great detail the so-called "Südtirolpaket," the package of measures for autonomy in German-speaking South Tyrol agreed upon between Austria and Italy. The

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<sup>5</sup> *Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements*, agreed by the Trilateral Contact Group at the Summit in Minsk on 12 February 2015.

agreement successfully ended the dispute between the two countries over the rights of the Tyrolean minority in Italy.

What adds to the complexity and confusion of the bilateral conflict between Ukraine and Russia is the status of the *right of self-determination* under modern international law (a notion that particularly gained traction after World War I, in the wake of President Woodrow Wilson's proposal of "14 Points" for world peace).<sup>6</sup> As things stand now, the approach of the international community seems to be one of double standards. Self-determination is invoked depending on circumstances of power and opportunity, not on the basis of an unequivocal legal concept. The different treatment of the developments concerning Kosovo and Crimea is a case in point.

Internationally (or globally), the basic principle for resolution of the conflict will be what Ukraine has already addressed in the "Istanbul Communiqué," namely an international status of *permanent military neutrality* similar to that adhered to by Switzerland and Austria (at least before March 2022). This alone will prevent a situation where Ukraine continues to be a pawn – to borrow a term from Zbigniew Brzezinski – on the "grand chessboard" of geopolitical rivalry between the United States, with the European Union in tandem, on the one side, and Russia on the other. This time, however, the neutral status would need to be backed up by robust security guarantees by the United Nations' P5, possibly joined by Turkey as major regional power. What was described as the security guarantees of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 – after Ukraine had committed itself to a nuclear-free status – were mere "assurances." *Non-interference in the internal affairs* will be another principle that is indispensable for a sustainable solution to the conflict. The geopolitical antagonists – or competitors – will need to reach a kind of gentleman's agreement on non-interference in the domestic disputes in Ukraine.

According to the understanding reached upon the end of the Cold War (to which I have already referred earlier), they should, on the basis of mutuality, also stick to the principle of not encroaching on each other's security domain (particularly as regards NATO enlargement after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact). Also, both sides – the United States and Russia – must be aware that a thermonuclear showdown would defeat the very purpose of their power struggle. In view of what military strategists of the Cold War described as the threat of "mutual assured destruction" (MAD), it would be an act of

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<sup>6</sup> *Address of the President of the United States, delivered at a joint session of the two houses of Congress, January 8, 1918.*

strategic irrationality par excellence. One should also not forget the solemn warning of President Kennedy in his “Peace Speech” of 1963.<sup>7</sup>

In a strategic quandary such as this one, *neutral states* may play a constructive role in terms of *mediation* in the search of compromise, but also of providing a *venue* for negotiations. As far as the latter is concerned, Switzerland and Austria, having thrown away their time-tested neutral status in the case of the Ukraine conflict, are not likely candidates. Unlike these supposedly still “permanently neutral” countries, Turkey – a member of NATO since 1952 – has proven to follow a constructive neutral approach vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine and, thus, enjoys credibility – in the eyes of the protagonists and the international community as well – to host peace talks and to act as facilitator of negotiations. To serve a useful role as mediator, a country does not need to have a status of “permanent neutrality,” enshrined in the constitution. What is decisive is *factual* neutrality in the respective conflict situation. The large prisoner swap between the warring parties in September of this year is proof of the constructive role of Turkey as is the “grain deal” mediated and rescued, so far – in the midst of the fighting – by Turkey. What may be small steps in relation to the larger picture of war, are nonetheless encouraging signs indicating that even in an entrenched conflict such as this one the antagonists – with the help of a mediator that carries the necessary weight – can escape the logic of war, in a moment of reason – or “soberness” – that may convince them of the virtues of diplomacy as sustainable alternative to a conflict protracted *ad infinitum*.

There is one important caveat: Mediation in this sense can only be successful if and as long as third parties keep out of the conflict, that means, if the arrogance of geopolitical manoeuvring can be held in check. The fate of Ukraine – and of Europe – must not be decided on the chessboard of Machiavellian power politics.

Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>7</sup> John Fitzgerald Kennedy, *Commencement Address at American University*, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963.