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‘A policy of détente for this day and age’

In the long term, Europe needs a security architecture that goes beyond two opposing blocs, argues German social-democratic MP Rolf Mützenich

Last week was dominated by the West’s negotiations with Russia. Following the OSCE talks, Russia demanded a quick decision on the security guarantees that it needed, otherwise it would deploy troops to Cuba or Venezuela. Russia’s foreign minister sees no reason for further talks at the moment, saying Russia will resort to other measures. So, what next? Are things about to escalate?

The Russian government’s recent reactions are regretful. I still hope those responsible will rethink their approach. It would be good to hear what the Russian prime minister, the defence minister and the president have to say about the talks. I still expect and hope that the various discussions of the past week will continue, as we have no reasonable alternatives. The US has rightly tried to calm things down through direct, bilateral talks. But that can only work if you don’t just explain your own point of view, but try to understand the security threats that the other side perceives – even if you don’t necessarily share their concerns. Only then can talks and the intense negotiations that follow work out.

The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) met on 12 January for the first time since 2019. But that hasn’t brought the two parties any closer. Where will the NRC go from here?

The NATO-Russia Council is an important instrument. I myself also expected more from the meeting. This certainly isn’t the first crisis between the Russia and the West. After Crimea was annexed in breach of international law, the NRC wasn’t leveraged, unfortunately – this might have helped to defuse the conflict. It’s all the more important that the Council has been revived now, at a time when we need negotiations on disarmament and measures to build trust.

The fact that nothing much came out of the talks last week is disappointing, which is part of the general disenchantment felt by many of those involved in the political dialogue in recent years. How could new momentum be gained?

I wouldn't say that dialogue hasn't been productive in the past. I don't believe the format is the problem, but the lack of will to use these talks for serious discussions on trust-building measures and pointing out ways to move forward. Unfortunately, there has been little willingness to do so in the past, both in Moscow and with some governments of NATO members.

Arms control is something that regularly crops up when talking about cooperation with Russia. What kind of new approaches could be taken here?

You have to be open in explaining what threats you perceive and try to understand the other side's perspective – even and especially if you don't see it their way. It seems to me there is evidence that Russia – still as a contractual partner in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at the time – violated its agreements. But at the same time, we must also remember that the US is deploying missile defence systems in Poland and Romania, which, in tandem with NATO's overall capabilities, represents an additional security-policy challenge for Russia.

However, the Biden administration is reviewing its Nuclear Posture Review, such as refraining from striking first with nuclear weapons. This would be a significant milestone for trust-building and reducing the threat from Russia's point of view. If we could then include the moratorium offered by Russia on deploying new weapons systems and a pledge to dismantle its nuclear capabilities, then we will have secured a great deal. At the same time, we must breathe new life into the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Charter of Paris, and give the European Union a stronger role.

With regard to NATO's expansion eastward, some warn that NATO risks its credibility if it all but gives Putin a veto over the admission of Georgia and Ukraine. Others say that Putin is right to feel threatened when NATO ends up surrounding Russia. What is NATO's future in Eastern Europe?

Russia is not entitled to veto decisions made freely by sovereign states, of course. At the same time, Georgia and Ukraine won't meet the criteria for NATO membership for the foreseeable future. But NATO will continue to exist until the conflict with Russia is over and we can implement a European security order that includes Russia.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could provide an umbrella for this. I have described this as a 'pluralistic security community', thinking back to the Cold War era long ago. I realise that some label me as an unrealistic friend of Russia, but I still maintain that, as well as providing military reinsurance, we need a long-term perspective for an overarching security architecture that goes beyond the blocs.

The US and Russia held European security negotiations last week in Geneva, without the EU at the table. Should we be concerned worry that Europe's future is being decided without its involvement?

I am deeply convinced that the decision-makers in Washington also have European interests at heart. However, we must bear in mind that the US no longer focuses on security challenges in Europe as it did in the Cold War. Its focus is now clearly on Asia, so we must act accordingly.

The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, rightly complained that there had been no consultation with the EU. However, not only should this be noted, but also the necessary action taken. That's why I believe the EU should adopt its Strategic Compass and its four baskets – crisis management, resilience, defence capabilities, and partnerships – soon, preferably in March. We have to recognise that dramatic events such as those of recent months are turning points and use them accordingly, similar to the Iraq War in 2003, which led the EU to adopt a security strategy under Javier Solana. But now we must be clever enough to do the same in the context of the situation today.

Many commentators have said that Europe didn't get a seat at the table in talks between the US and Russia because it simply had nothing to offer. What needs to change so that the EU be treated as an equal negotiating partner in future?

I believe that this perception is shaped by too much of a unilateral focus on military capabilities. Europe can improve its standing if it focuses more on pooling its capabilities and creating synergies. We need to accept that, in the interests of a security community, individual countries have certain capabilities and others deliberately do not. That would mean big savings and greater efficiency. What we have to offer, on the other hand, is that we see security policy as more than just military power. For us, this includes diplomacy, smart foreign-policy initiatives and, in particular, the ability to create incentives through economic cooperation, so we can all live together in Europe harmoniously.

In Germany, you can't mention policy towards the East without thinking of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr. What lessons can we learn from their policies that we can apply today?

Well, there wouldn't have been any *Ostpolitik* without Willy Brandt's visionary aspirations. So, without disregarding the realities of foreign policy, you have to have an idea of what you want to achieve – even if it might seem out of reach. We can certainly learn from those who have championed a policy of détente and try to see the world the way others do. This involves NATO and EU partner states in Eastern Europe. But it also applies to Russia and other former Soviet states. We must bear this in mind and embed it in any potential proposals. This would be in line with what Willy Brandt, Egon Bahr, Helmut Schmidt, Gerhard Schröder and European partners such as Bruno Kreisky, Olof Palme and many others did. We can still pursue this approach now, in full knowledge that we can't just replicate the policy of back then and apply it today. We need a policy of détente that works for this day and age.

This interview was conducted by Anja Wehler-Schöck.



Rolf Mützenich
Berlin

Rolf Mützenich has been a member of the German Bundestag since 2002. He was the Chairman of the SPD parliamentary group in the Bundestag from 2019 to 2025.