Looking for an exit-strategy

The massive rearmament and mutual threats are strongly reminiscent of the Cold War. Although today's situation is different, there are parallels

In recent years, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been pursuing two central goals with regard to security and the military: first, stopping NATO's eastward expansion, and second, overthrowing the Ukrainian government and occupying at least part of the territory. Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the Putin regime's so-called 'military special operation' has failed to achieve these goals. On the contrary, with Finland and Sweden having become members of NATO, the transatlantic alliance has moved even closer to Russia.

The expected overnight success in Ukraine also failed to materialise and the dispute has turned into a war of attrition. But the war is not just between Russia and Ukraine: NATO is also part of the confrontation. The governments of the NATO countries repeatedly emphasise that they are not directly involved in this war. However, military support for Ukraine is now quite extensive, and in fact Russia's aggression has strengthened the cohesion in both NATO and the EU.

Taking inspiration from the Cold War past

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a game changer for European foreign and security policy. The broad guidelines of that policy, established after the end of the Cold War, are now suspended. But what political project can end this brutal war, and what could a new European security policy look like? These questions must be raised in view of the huge losses in Ukraine and in Russia as well. A primary goal would have to be a ceasefire to end the loss of life and limb, the destruction of infrastructure, and the displacement of several million people. Furthermore, there is a need to end the economic disruptions that are affecting the entire globe. Of particular concern for many countries is the interruption in grain supplies, while for others – and not just Russia – are the drastic sanctions and the loss of energy and raw material sources. As

long as both sides believe in a military victory, there is little hope for negotiations. However, the clearly noticeable signs of fatigue could now contribute to a suspension in the hostilities.

The history of détente shows that despite miserable conditions, diplomatic success and numerous arms control treaties were possible in the 1970s and 1980s.

But how would it be possible to persuade Putin's side to give in? At present, dialogue and diplomatic efforts are getting nowhere. Between Russia on the one hand and the EU and NATO on the other, the lines of communication have been broken – despite the efforts of Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz. The Chinese government, which has influence over Russia, remains silent, which in effect strengthens Putin.

The massive rearmament and the mutual threats are strongly reminiscent of the Cold War. Although today's situation is very different, there are indeed parallels. The history of détente shows that despite miserable conditions, diplomatic success and numerous arms control treaties were possible in the 1970s and 1980s. The Helsinki Final Act or Accord of 1975 laid down important principles. Agreements on national sovereignty, the inviolability of borders, respect for human rights, and economic, technical, and cultural cooperation were necessary to end the confrontation between the blocs. Even if the Helsinki principles are now being trampled on by Russia, it is still worth looking back to draw conclusions that apply to the present day.

Four ways of approaching an end

Despite the threat of nuclear war and mutually assured destruction, the confrontation between the political systems, the division of Germany, the so-called Iron Curtain and ideological competition, it was possible to reduce tensions and reach contractual agreements. Likewise, what looks today to be an insoluble confrontation should not lead to a reliance primarily or exclusively on military means, especially as Russia will almost certainly remain a nuclear power even after the war has ended. Four possible ways seem appropriate: outside mediation, for example through neutral states; a Helsinki II process; the revitalisation of the OSCE; and a Minsk III process.

First, mediation: So far, efforts by African governments to send delegations to Moscow have been unsuccessful. Nor have the initiatives of Brazilian President Lula da Silva, Indian Prime Minister Modi, and Turkish President Erdoğan led to any breakthrough. All the same, at the moment only an initiative from the outside seems promising. Perhaps a

dialogue between Pope Francis and the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Cyril I, could dissolve the hardened fronts. The grain agreement brokered by the UN and Erdoğan has shown that humanitarian steps are possible, even if Moscow has now terminated that agreement.

Not only to end the war in Ukraine, but also to stop and de-escalate the uncontrolled arms race at all levels over the long term.

Second, Helsinki II: the West's basis for security policy at the 1975 Helsinki Conference was a dual strategy, as proposed in NATO's 1967 Harmel Report. It comprised military strength on the one hand and lasting political relations between NATO and the Warsaw Pact on the other. And therefore, this means military deterrence with simultaneous negotiations on armaments reductions, combined with political agreements that ultimately led to the dissolution of the bloc confrontation.

Third, revitalisation of the OSCE: the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) with its 57 member countries in Europe, North America, and Central Asia actually provides a forum for dialogue to regulate security policy conflicts. However, the tensions in Europe have led to a marginalisation of the organisation, which in view of the Ukraine war and other 'frozen' conflicts (e.g. in the Caucasus) is in urgent need of revitalisation.

Fourth, Minsk III: in the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements, measures were agreed to politically settle the war that has been going on in eastern Ukraine since 2014. Ukraine has rejected Minsk-style negotiations and President Putin declared the agreement a failure before the February 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine. Still such forums are necessary today, despite or even because of the deadlocked confrontation. This is not only to end the war in Ukraine, but also to stop and de-escalate the uncontrolled arms race at all levels over the long term. Regardless of how the war progresses, serious negotiations will eventually be necessary. A ceasefire or even peace is hardly possible without negotiations, and war is never an answer to anything.

The need for diplomacy

Functioning communication and arms control forums in which wartime enemies could exchange ideas existed even during the Cold War. Since the end of the 1960s there have been negotiations on nuclear weapons and starting in 1973, on conventional armaments, which progressed slowly but ultimately prevented unintentional wars and led to the reduction of military potential. Unlike today, the outbreak of a hot war

was prevented. But how can the current war be ended? What matters now is to support Ukraine with all reasonable and justifiable means. However, what is 'reasonable and justifiable' is judged very differently, as recently illustrated by the controversial supply of cluster munitions by the US.

The demands of the Ukrainian government go far beyond what is currently being offered by the US, NATO and the EU, although Ukraine's supporters have gradually expanded their military assistance. Opinions are also divided on the economic measures and the severity of the sanctions. The order of the day, while continuing the West's policy of military strength, should be procedures for de-escalation.

A political project must be pursued in which nuclear deterrence is contained: one that would include a concept for de-escalation, arms control and perhaps eventually disarmament.

The sanctions must hit Russia hard, but it is unrealistic to count on the collapse of the Putin system in the short term. Continued pressure on Moscow is necessary, but Putin must also be given a face-saving opportunity to end his belligerence. This is not a policy of appeasement, but an exit strategy. However, it must also be made clear to Ukraine that unrealistic war aims merely prolong the war and should therefore not receive any support from the West.

In the long term, a Helsinki II for all of Europe is necessary, implemented by an organisation like the OSCE. Ending the war in Ukraine requires a process such as that attempted with the Minsk agreements. Even if the Minsk process failed, there is no way around negotiations. A political project must be pursued in which nuclear deterrence is contained: one that would include a concept for de-escalation, arms control and perhaps eventually disarmament.

It is particularly important to recall some of the principles agreed within the scope of Helsinki I. One of them is compliance with international law. Russia blatantly violated this principle by invading Ukraine and before that by annexing Crimea. But the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the Kosovo war in 1999 by the US, a 'coalition of the willing', and NATO were also clear violations of international law. This rule of law is universal and we should work to uphold these principles. Those who emphasise the rules-based international order should themselves strictly abide by those rules.



Herbert Wulf

Duisburg

Herbert Wulf was Director of the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) from its foundation in 1994 until 2001. He is currently a Senior Fellow at BICC and an Adjunct Senior Researcher at the Institute for Development and Peace, University of Duisburg/Essen where he was previously a Deputy Director.

-