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No exit to the 19th century

A 'face-saving' deal for Putin? If Europe wants to live in peace, Russia must not be rewarded at Ukraine's expense

In the search for an exit strategy for the war against Ukraine, similar arguments have been put forward time and again since the war began. In his recent article, Herbert Wulf, for example, stresses the need for a quick ceasefire as a short-term goal to prevent death and suffering. He argues that this could be the starting point for the first steps towards a new security architecture for Europe. In order to achieve this, the author first calls for neutral mediation from outside, as has proven successful in the negotiation of the grain agreement, which has since been terminated. This should be followed by a negotiation process in accordance with the 'Helsinki principles', a new Helsinki Final Act (Helsinki II), the revival of the OSCE and a renegotiated agreement to end the war (Minsk III).

Wulf's guiding principle is to draw on tried and tested Cold War lessons and methods, ultimately to deal with the danger of escalation associated with the current volatile situation. The approach is understandable - but is it realistic?

Squaring the circle

Wulf bases the assumption that the path he describes could be successful on the historical example of the Cold War. However, just the comparability of the precedent seems questionable: the Soviet Union of the Cold War was a world power bent on consolidation, not wanting to lose what it had won in the Second World War. Putin's Russia is a revanchist superpower trying to recapture lost parts of its empire. In his reflections, the author dusts off a buzzword from the early phase of the war: an agreement must be 'face-saving' for Moscow. This may make sense to silence the weapons. But 'saving face' means something quite different for Vladimir Putin than it would have meant for Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev - namely, a tangible return on war policy and war crimes that encourages continuation.

It is therefore logical that the process outlined by Wulf submits to the logic of Moscow revisionism. Russia's vision of a 'multipolar' world order

ultimately means a security policy role reverted to the 19th century. It demands the recognition of legitimate spheres of influence of the great powers, which define themselves as poles within said multipolarity. This security policy concept failed catastrophically in two world wars. That is why the world community replaced it with the rules-based order that the German government continues to invoke.

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Moscow is also fighting for the dismantling of this order in Ukraine. A potential 'Helsinki II' process translates there as: 'away with the principle of inviolability of borders by force'. The Russian leadership has been calling for a new Helsinki conference to recognise the multipolar world order for years. Its outcome, however, would certainly not be a return to the relatively stable conditions of the Cold War. A 'revived' OSCE constituted according to Moscow's specifications could therefore have no more of a pacifying and stabilising effect than possible 'Minsk III' negotiations on the future of Ukraine. Moreover, Ukraine's democratically elected government cannot possibly voluntarily expose itself to a negotiation process with the premise of 'saving face' for Russia's war policy. Such a 'Minsk III' can therefore only come about if the Western partners withdraw their support from Ukraine.

The picture that emerges is one of squaring the circle: a negotiated solution that would amount to restoring the status quo ante bellum cannot be 'face-saving' for the revanchist imperialism of the Russian leadership and is therefore not an option for them. A solution in which new borders altered by force are in fact accepted is in blatant contradiction to the 'Helsinki principles' invoked by Wulf and to international law. Ultimately, this would mean a confirmation of the war policy, which would encourage Moscow to continue its successful strategy and therefore would not have a lasting pacifying effect - quite aside from the fact that no democratically elected government in Ukraine could ever adopt such an exit strategy.

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In conclusion, the exit strategy outlined by Wulf proves to be an illusion or, worse, a (partial) capitulation to Russia's war policy. A ceasefire now means: the occupied parts of Ukraine are de facto permanently ceded to

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Russia, with the consequence, for the security of Europe and the world, that aggressive war is rehabilitated as a means of foreign policy. A renegotiated 'Helsinki II' meant: the rule-based world order would be abandoned in favour of a balance of the great powers with recognition of their spheres of influence. One may consider this to be realism and interpret the relatively stable bipolarity of the Cold War as merely a variant of this model. However, even the advocates of an exit strategy along the lines of Wulf's are unlikely to seriously claim that such a world would be safer and more stable in the foreseeable future than the one we live in today.

The alternative therefore remains correct. Ukraine must receive the support it needs for a successful defence. Defence explicitly includes the liberation of occupied territories. It is obvious that this cannot be achieved by a glamorous operation in the style of early tank battles, but only by a persistent struggle with a plan designed for long-term success. This perspective, however, should not lead to supporters wearing out faster than the fighting Ukraine. For only Russian failure can refute the Kremlin's war policy and thus restore the basis for stability in security policy.



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