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The unintended consequences of the Zeitenwende

In the fog of war, there are no simple solutions, only risks and dilemmas

Within the German debate, the question of how to respond to a revisionist Russia focuses on how to better organise deterrence, defence and support to Ukraine. This is important to protect Ukraine and reduce Russian appetite for further aggression. But the debate is flawed, as not enough attention is being paid to a potential military escalation, as well as other unintended consequences of the *Zeitenwende.* Germany needs a broader political and public debate on how to manage these risks.

According to the law of unintended consequences, any action has several effects. Certain conditions increase the likelihood of unintended consequences. Western efforts against Russian revisionism require risk management, whereby intended (positive) effects are weighed against (negative) unintended effects. After all, there are at least five reasons why such efforts are prone to producing new problems or exacerbating existing ones.

First, high levels of uncertainty increase the likelihood of unintended consequences. Does Russia's quest for empire include the Baltic states or Moldova? At what point does Putin see a threat to regime stability? Deducing intentions from past Russian policy or presumed interests (such as a shared aversion against to inadvertent escalation) is problematic. After all, some research findings question Putin's rationality or argue that Russia prioritises status gains over stability.

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Second, Putin is willing and able to fight a long war. While Ukraine will continue fighting for its survival. Its allies are likely to continue their support (and find ways to cope with a potential Trump presidency). But the longer the war continues, the more likely are unwanted effects, because there are more situations where accidents may occur that spiral out of control.

Third, geographical proximity creates risks. Along NATO's eastern borders, such as in the Baltic Sea area, NATO and Russian forces operate close together. The risk of escalation was there before 24 February 2022, and Russia's invasion and NATO responses created new escalation scenarios.

Fourth, the Ukraine war takes place in a complex international system, and systems effects are non-linear and thus unpredictable. Western states must not only deal with Russia but also with global power shifts, populists at home, and – most importantly over the long term – the climate crisis. Trying to save Ukraine has knock-on effects in various policy areas.

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Fifth, there is much risk tolerance. Especially eastern NATO members assume that only power can contain Russia and therefore find they have more to lose than to gain from cautious risk management. Lithuania wanted to block Russian transit goods to Kaliningrad, and it echoed Macron's idea of sending NATO ground troops to Ukraine. In Germany, politicians and experts who show caution tend to be portrayed as victims of Putin's fearmongering, which has a chilling effect on those wanting a broader debate on unintended consequences. The term 'Selbstabschreckung' (self-deterrence) in Germany underlines this tendency. Politicians might also avoid a wider debate because of worries that this will reduce support for arming Ukraine, as voters might not accept the costs of a long war.

Potential outcomes

The factors discussed above can produce a variety of unintended consequences. Germany and other Western countries should pay more attention to at least the following six.

Pathways to *military escalation* deserve more scrutiny. The fact that the use of nuclear weapons is not a fantasy is underscored by recent reports that the US intelligence community estimated the use of nuclear weapons in the autumn of 2022 at 50 per cent in the event of a Ukrainian breakthrough into Crimea.

Opportunity costs must also be taken into account. The economic costs of

war are already immense. And in the case of a long war, this is only the beginning. Investing in deterrence, defence and arming Ukraine reduces badly needed investments in technology or public infrastructure. Potential beneficiaries include China and, in the German context, the AfD.

Confrontation with Russia also stymies *multilateral institutions*, and thus a key multiplier of German foreign policy. The OSCE, for example, suffered under Russia vetoing key decisions, also in response to Western efforts to isolate Russia within this consensus-based organisation. Cooperation on vital matters becomes trickier, too, as shown by the difficulty of addressing the security implications of climate change in the OSCE. With regard to the EU, agreements with Russia that addressed problems such as transborder pollution are suspended.

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The German debate should also pay more attention to the possible *overstretching of the EU*. Ukraine will continue to need vast sums of EU money for stabilisation and reconstruction. This will test the unity of a large club in which preferences are increasingly divergent. But the greatest known unknown is whether Ukraine will implement the EU acquis. Put differently: has Ukrainian politics changed enough to shed its legacy of personalised, network-based rule? Researchers who previously pointed to such patronal politics more recently stressed a Zelenskyy effect, i.e., the transformative power of a new generation under a new leader. But the success of building democratic institutions is not a given – as claims of continuing authoritarian practices indicate. Ukraine's size and legacies of war will dwarf similar problems experienced during previous EU enlargement rounds.

The inadvertent *strengthening of autocracy* is also part of the *Zeitenwende*. Germany's and other Western efforts to isolate Russia have forged closer ties with autocracies. Examples include Germany buying more oil and gas from the Gulf States, or the EU buying more gas from Azerbaijan. Western dependency on the Global South reduces the ability of the EU to make trade deals conditional upon human rights. Such realpolitik comes at the cost of fuelling charges of Western double standards.

Last but not least, cutting ties with Russia *can contribute to the siege*

mentality created by the Kremlin. Inhabitants of the Russian exclave Kaliningrad, for example, used to frequently travel to Poland and beyond but now spend more time in other Russian cities, as Poland is building a reinforced fence around Kaliningrad. The more Russia is cut off from the outside world, the less likely are the long-term prospects for alternatives to the current revisionist narrative.

Managing the consequences

As long as the Kremlin's imperialism lasts, deterring and defending against Russia will dominate the security practices and discourses of Ukraine's Western allies. But the *Zeitenwende* also needs to avoid catastrophic unintended consequences and mitigate those that cannot be avoided. Risk management is not cowardice.

Which risk management strategies are appropriate depends on the specific problem they aim to address. With regard to military escalation, proponents of an incremental approach such as Olaf Scholz have been much criticised. Indeed, not delivering enough and the right weapons systems can partly explain Ukraine's current battlefield problems. But incrementalism is also said to have contributed to preventing escalation, such as by signalling intentions to Moscow.

In the fog of war, under conditions of high uncertainty, there are no simple solutions, only risks and dilemmas. We need a political and public debate on unintended consequences of the *Zeitenwende* that recognises uncertainty and complexity, in which participants make their assumptions explicit and are willing to listen to opposing views. Unfortunately, this is a tall order given that the talk show zeitgeist is more favourable to soundbites.



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