‘The West felt too certain for too long’

SPD co-leader Lars Klingbeil on mistakes towards Eastern Europe, Germany’s role as a leading power, and the global competition for influence

A famous definition of crisis goes back to the Italian writer and intellectual Antonio Gramsci. He says that in a crisis, the old has ceased to exist, but the new has not yet begun.

Today we are living in a time of multiple crises: war, climate change, the pandemic, inflation, social division. Each of these crises in itself represents an enormous challenge for our society. But the crises are occurring simultaneously. They are interconnected and reinforcing one another.

The beginning of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a turning point for the European peace order – a *Zeitenwende* (‘watershed moment’). We face the major task of drawing the right conclusions because its upheaval have implications for our social relations and for the political agenda of the next 20 years.

Russian President Vladimir Putin started this war. He bears the responsibility for the brutal killings, for the suffering inflicted on Ukrainians. It is his attack on the sovereignty of a European country. We are not to blame for Putin’s war, but we must ask ourselves self-critically what we could have done differently before 24 February. Above all, however, we must ask ourselves what we can now do better with a view to the future.

After the mass murder of European Jews and the two world wars started by the German Reich, we were readmitted into the international family of states. It was miraculous that first the Federal Republic and later the united Germany once again became a cherished partner of the international community. Our history dictates that we must exercise restraint. Our integration in Europe became part of our new self-understanding.

The end of World War II led to the emergence a bipolar world order, we experienced the formation of blocs and competition between systems. Either West or East, capitalism or communism: we lived in this world order for decades. It came to an abrupt end in 1989. The West had won. For many, it was only a matter of time until the whole world consisted exclusively of liberal democracies.

Samuel Huntington wrote about waves of democratisation. Francis Fukuyama even proclaimed the end of history. Today we know better: history had never come to an end. I firmly believe that our social model of a liberal democratic society is the best. But just because we see it this way, doesn't mean it's seen this way all across the world.

The West felt too certain for too long. A war between states in Europe seemed unimaginable. For many decades, our peace order was based on the belief in the inalterability of borders, in state sovereignty, all cast in treaties and international law. We made ourselves comfortable in this world. When it was jolted here or there, we were convinced that everything would settle down again in the end. We believed that in the end our political model would prevail, that the rules-based order would prevail.

We failed to recognise that things had long since begun to take a different course. We should have interpreted the signals from Russia differently – at the latest with the annexation of Crimea in violation of international law. Russia became increasingly authoritarian and is now a dictatorship. China also has a completely different vision from ours. And the truth is that many countries in the Global South have been disappointed by the promises of liberal democracies.

Until now, the major global players have secured global political influence through pressure and allegiance. The world will be organised differently in the future. It will no longer be organised in separate poles, but in centres exercising power in multiple ways. Allegiance, pressure, and oppression are no longer decisive for alignment, but instead convictions and interests. These power centres are attractive; they create ties, dependencies, and cooperation. Joining them is in one's own interest.

This world order has major advantages for states that as yet do not constitute a strong centre but have great economic and political potential, because they no longer have to align themselves with a bloc. They can choose which issues they want to cooperate on and with whom.

China is taking a very strategic approach to expanding its influence and

bringing states on its side. Russia has also been cultivating relations with emerging countries for years, thereby binding them to itself. In this way, alternatives to the Western model of development have grown. For many years, Russia and China have also been courting democratic states such as South Africa, India, and Brazil, giving them a voice at the international level through the BRICS initiative, for example. They have seen the interests of these countries and have treated their governments with respect. That has built trust.

We are currently seeing the consequences of this development, when many states are rejecting our path of sanctions against Russia. The votes in the United Nations General Assembly show that half of the world's population does not support our policy. This must give us pause for thought. While it should not affect the substance and severity of our decisions, it should influence our activities in other regions of the world.

We must devote ourselves to cultivating binding power, forging new political alliances, concluding partnership agreements, and offering open structures such as the international climate club. We need structures that are inclusive and not exclusive. We must build and expand these strategic partnerships. More specifically, this must already happen in the coming months when it comes to confronting food shortages.

There will be famines in Africa, Latin America, and many countries in Asia, partially as a consequence of Putin's war. We must engage more intensively with the countries of the Global South and make them offers of cooperation. In doing so, we should seek new partnerships, for example, in the areas of health, technology, alternative fuels such as hydrogen, and climate change.

Our ambition in Europe must be to become the world's first climate-neutral continent, to create innovations and standards, and to ensure that the transformation is socially just. We want to show that climate protection *and* prosperity can go hand in hand. If we succeed, other countries will follow the same path.

It is clear that we will also have to deal with countries that do not share our values, or that even reject our social order. It is always a matter of weighing up how deep our cooperation should go and at what point such cooperation might violate our principles and values. We must address injustice. There cannot be cooperation without taking a stance. Change through rapprochement must never be reduced to change through trade.

We must never again become as dependent as we became on Russia regarding energy policy. Europe must develop its strategic autonomy.

Critical goods and critical infrastructure must be produced and supported here in Europe. With regard to China, this means, for example, reducing dependencies in the areas of medicine and technology. It does not mean that we should no longer trade with countries like China, as some are proposing – but it does mean that we must adopt strategically clever and resilient courses of action.

We are now facing several years of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the future world order. The coming years will be marked by competition for relationships, dependencies, ties, collaborations, and influence. No state can master the challenges of the globalised world alone. Therefore, we need strong centres working in a single direction. It remains enormously important in this respect that we as the West stand shoulder to shoulder: a strong Europe at the core, but in close alliance with the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, and others. Our aspiration must be to become the most attractive centre.

A great deal depends on Germany in this regard. Germany must aspire to be a leading power. After almost 80 years of restraint, Germany now has a new role in the international system. Germany has built up a high level of trust over the past decades. But with this trust come expectations. We have just seen that in the discussions over the past weeks. Germany is increasingly the centre of attention. We should fulfil these expectations.

Leadership does not mean adopting an aggressive, macho posture. Hopefully, smart leadership cultures will also prevail in international politics – just as they do in domestic politics. Incidentally, this also includes the idea of a feminist foreign policy. Leadership means being aware of your role: not shirking challenges or confrontation, taking others with you; never being arrogant, but acting thoughtfully, with conviction and consistently. A collaborative leadership style is a smart leadership style.

It must always be clear what our motivation is. We conduct foreign policy so that people can live in security, peace, and prosperity. US President Biden speaks of ‘foreign policy for the middle class’. This is exactly the right approach. Foreign policy engagement is never an end in itself; it always has an impact on our concrete social conditions.

We are currently witnessing the enormous cost of an unstable international order, war and disrupted supply chains for life here at home. In the end, international conflicts also have an enormous explosive potential for our democracy and the cohesion of our society. This is precisely why foreign policy engagement is so important. This new role as a leading power will require Germany to make tough decisions – financial

as well as political. We need to change structures and renegotiate budgets.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the German government have had to rethink and change some basic principles of German foreign policy in recent weeks. We stand in solidarity with Ukraine. We are supplying weapons, including heavy artillery. We are imposing tough sanctions whose effects Russia will feel for decades. And we are exerting tough political pressure together with our partners in the US and Europe. It is right that we are taking these steps. This is also bound up with Germany's new role.

In recent years, we all went along with the mainstream approach in security policy of neglecting national and alliance defence. In mid-February, more than 2,000 security experts gathered at the Munich Security Conference. Only a handful of them assumed that Putin would attack Ukraine. A few days later, Putin launched his attack. It still bothers me today that we all didn't see that coming.

Therefore, we have to think in scenarios and prepare ourselves for these scenarios. When we hear from the Baltic States or Poland that they are afraid of being Russia's next targets, then we must take this seriously. We have made mistakes in our dealings with our Eastern and Central European partners. It is therefore important that we engage in closer dialogue with them and move Europe forward together.

Olaf Scholz has made it clear on several occasions that we will defend every inch of NATO territory. I welcome his decision to station more German troops on NATO's eastern flank and to intensify the protection of our Eastern European partners. However, this urgently requires better equipping the Bundeswehr.

It is good that we have launched the €100bn special fund for the Bundeswehr. This will enable us to close capability gaps and place national and alliance defence back in the spotlight. Previously one almost had the impression that some people believed that the less Bundeswehr there was, the less likely there would be a war. But the opposite is the case. It is not talking about war that leads to war. Closing one's eyes to reality is what leads to war.

For me, peace policy also means seeing military force as a legitimate means of politics. Incidentally, this is also envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations. It is always the last resort, but it must also be clear that it is a means. We are seeing this now in Ukraine.

I suspect some of you are now alarmed. The chairperson of the SPD is speaking of Germany as a leading power, about the Bundeswehr, about

military force. I can imagine what course some debates will take now. But my claim is that we should be realistic. Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt already knew that military strength and capability are also among the foundations for a powerful peace policy. At that time, the defence budget represented more than three per cent of our GDP.

The hand we extend must be strong. Brandt and Schmidt understood that one can only stand up for peace and human rights from a position of strength. We should not conduct debates in a truncated manner. I am proud of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik. After all, it won him the Nobel Peace Prize. Brandt's Ostpolitik was the basis for reunification, overcoming systemic contradictions and the democratisation of many former Eastern Bloc states.

When I say that the *Zeitenwende* requires us to take leave of certainties, this does not mean throwing everything overboard that was right. Diplomacy, agreements, international disarmament initiatives, international law, development policy, multilateralism, and fair international financial policy – these are and will remain the most successful means of conflict resolution and, above all, conflict prevention. They are part of a comprehensive security policy.

The most important project of social-democratic foreign and security policy is Europe. As a leading power, Germany must massively promote a sovereign Europe. We have seen in the history of the EU what is possible when there was sufficient political will and initiative. Schengen, the introduction of the euro, the historic treaties of Maastricht and Lisbon, or more recently the recovery plan for Europe following the Covid-19 pandemic: these were all decisions of great moment that have improved our lives in Europe.

The *Zeitenwende* is an epochal upheaval. The European peace and security order is undergoing reorganisation. The fact that states are taking their cue from the European Union and want to be part of us shows the attractiveness we already possess as a centre.

But this attractiveness also goes hand in hand with political responsibility. This includes the enlargement policy. Europe must acquire greater weight as a geopolitical player. After the end of the Cold War, the EU already showed once that it is capable of acting geopolitically and strategically. It was a political objective to enable the former Eastern Bloc countries to quickly join the EU.

The EU should push the next accession negotiations forward with political pressure now as well. That does not mean any discount or 'fast

track' for the candidate countries. The Copenhagen criteria apply. But this means that we will not allow the accession processes to become bogged down in the mills of Brussels bureaucracy, but will actively drive them forward as a geopolitical project.

But of course, when we talk about enlargement, we also have to talk about internal reforms. Only in this way will the EU also become capable of admitting new members. Even with more members, the European Union must be able to act quickly. We must therefore abolish the principle of unanimity, for example in foreign policy and in financial and fiscal policy. That would make the EU more adroit, quicker to act, and more democratic. And there will be no compromises on the rule of law and democracy. Therefore, we need a new mechanism to effectively defend the Copenhagen criteria even after a country has been admitted.

Many ambitious ideas on Europe have been discussed in recent years and then shuffled back and forth in the corridors of bureaucracy until they eventually petered out. Such as the push for a European defence and security policy for which the right time is now. 27 countries that maintain their own procurement systems, have their own defence contractors, and negotiate individually with these contractors – it is impossible to explain why we are not finally bundling these resources at European level.

In the end, the goal must be for us to effectively pool resources and build a strong European pillar in NATO. The European states in NATO should in future be able to jointly defend European territory. This is not a policy against the transatlantic alliance, but one that strengthens the alliance.

In addition to foreign and security policy, it is also a matter of strengthening Europe internally, of investing in social cohesion. All over Europe, people are struggling with increased prices. The war is also endangering social peace in our country. This is part of Putin's strategy. He is waging a war against the European democracies; he wants to subvert and divide them.

We need to hold our societies together in this crisis. With the Covid-19 recovery fund and the SURE programme, a European protective shield against unemployment, we have demonstrated this in recent times. This has provided security throughout Europe. Now, the task is to ensure that this progress is firmly anchored. This includes allowing flexibility in a reform of the Stability and Growth Pact to invest in future-related issues such as the ecological and digital transformation.

After all, transformation is the topic of the future par excellence. It has an ecological and an economic dimension; but, at the latest with this war, it also has a security policy dimension. We have already set ambitious targets in the coalition agreement: climate neutrality by 2045, a massive expansion of renewable energy sources, the development of a hydrogen energy economy, and the promotion of innovative technologies. The transformation has acquired a new urgency as a result of the *Zeitenwende*. We do not want to achieve this against industry, but with industry.

We must now make rapid progress with investments in renewables and new energy sources. This will require considerable investment for a number of years. But they are investments in our long-term prosperity. In this way, we are laying the foundations for good jobs and good wages in Europe. By promoting climate-friendly innovations in Europe and we can also set global standards. And these are investments in our independence and thus investments in our security.

The old is no longer, the new is not yet here. I believe in the unique power of Europe. I believe in the power of social-democratic convictions for a life in freedom, security, and solidarity. And I believe in the creative power of our democracy, the power of politics to grow through crises and to shape a better future.

These are excerpts of Lars Klingbeil's speech on the Zeitenwende at the Tiergarten Conference 2022, which took place on 21 June 2022 in Berlin.



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