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## Viewpoint from Hamburg



Photo: Ludolf von Löwenstern

### Secure Trade at Sea is a Collective Asset

Ludolf Baron von Löwenstern

At the 56<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference, which began on 14 February 2020, the participating heads of state and government as well as more than 100 foreign and defence ministers discussed the disintegration of the West in foreign and security policy under the heading 'Westlessness'. Thus – at long last – an issue, which needs clarification, especially for Germany, has moved into the public interest, namely what security and defence policy must achieve in order to effectively represent the economic interests of Germany and Europe in an age of great power competition. In her keynote speech on foreign and security policy at the Bundeswehr University in Munich, Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer made it clear that she wants to realign Germany's foreign and security policy in terms of being more responsible, more courageous and, in terms of Germany's role in the world, more appropriate. Germany, she emphasised, had a duty and, as one of the leading industrial and trading nations, had a great interest in protecting the international order – including through military action. Against the background of an increasingly multipolar world, terrorism, the rise and expansion of China and 'America First' with the withdrawal of the US from the world stage, she called for more funds to be available for the Bundeswehr and greater participation in foreign missions as far away as the Indo-Pacific. She also suggest-

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ed a National Security Council, which could strengthen geopolitical thinking and create the necessary acceptance in society.

#### A Setting of the Course

Such a change of course is overdue from an economic and political perspective. After all, the question of what German security and defence policy must be like – in order to effectively serve the economic interests of Germany and Europe in an age of global competition between major powers – has never been answered satisfactorily since the end of the Cold War.

There can hardly be any doubt that Germans in particular must have the greatest interest in the free exchange of goods and secure trade routes. After all, Germany is one of the largest import and export countries in the world. Most of its foreign trade – 95% of global trade in goods and 30% of European traffic – is transported by water. As a country poor in raw materials, Germany has to first bring many things from all over the world in order to refine them here and sell them to global customers. With around 1,400 ships, Germany has the largest container fleet and, with around 3,200 ships, the fourth largest merchant fleet in the world.

For Germany and EU member states, the maritime environment, therefore, plays an important geopolitical and geostrategic role in the geographical, security, economic and cultural sense. In addition, 90% of foreign trade and 40% of EU domestic trade is reliant on maritime transport logistics. 80% of European oil and natural gas production comes from the North, Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas. The geopolitical focus is, therefore, turned towards the maritime area and the EU is thus a global maritime player.

The dependence on free sea routes, the increasing importance of critical infrastructures for energy production and energy sources on the high seas, illegal maritime immigration, illegal arms and drug trafficking, piracy, organised crime, terrorist attacks (for example on ships), oil platforms, port facilities, etc., represent major security and defence policy risks that must be dealt with. Also in the future – at least according to the confessions of those in power – Germany should continue to be one of the engines

of the global economy. It is often forgotten that this includes the ability to effectively assert one's own interests. Frederick the Great already knew this when he noted: "Diplomacy without weapons is like an orchestra without instruments". Wolfgang Ischinger also put it in a nutshell when he wrote: "You cannot conduct foreign policy without the military. Otherwise, foreign policy is just hot air." The maritime aspects of national and alliance defence are of particular importance here, because the trade routes on the world's oceans are not only the main arteries of globalisation, they also form the basis for growth and prosperity in Germany and Europe.

Maritime security is, therefore, long since been discussed not only in the situation centres of the military or politics, but also on the management floors of internationally operating companies. And terrorist attacks are by no means the only risk. If – as already discussed – 'bottlenecks' such as the Strait of Hormuz, Straits of Malacca or Suez Canal – the most sensitive bottlenecks in the sea route between Europe and Asia, or even the Kiel Canal – become impassable by whatever act, almost every company involved in world trade will be affected – even the LIDL market around the corner. Another idea that robs many an entrepreneur of sleep is that of a radiological weapon, also known as a 'dirty' bomb, which is smuggled into one of the approximately 38 million containers that constantly pass through the world's sea routes and ports. Or the so-called 'asymmetric' or 'hybrid' threats, which include digital espionage and the sabotage of, for example, nuclear reactors or basic medical care.

### More Responsibility Means More Safety. Also and Especially for the German Economy

These examples illustrate the increased vulnerability, but also the sheer necessity of a 'Secure Economy', i.e. a security architecture that better protects the German economy, also in maritime terms. In Germany, this protection is the task of the Navy – provided that it has sufficient ships, personnel, equipment and materials. In addition, the political mandate to protect maritime trade routes must be clearly defined operationally (the primacy of politics). Unfortunately, however, this is not the case either. For example, according to the current constitutional situation, the Navy is not entitled to intervene in the event of danger from international terrorism without a corresponding mandate, neither on its own coastal apron nor in the global area, as the prevailing legal opinion is that this is a 'police task'. Germany, therefore, urgently needs a national security concept, which also and above all clearly regulates the role of the Navy in protecting maritime trade routes.

### Five Major Regions: USA, China, Russia, India and the Europeans!

World politics is also maritime politics, and the German Navy contributes its share to global prevention and crisis management. As the German Navy cannot manage the protection of sea routes alone, it usually operates in cooperation with other NATO navies and partners. This is why we need a Europe that is

capable of taking action in the field of security policy on the basis of a European defence and security concept that does not remain a political declaration of intent but is implemented in concrete terms in order to be prepared for the threats and dangers of the 'new age'. The US accusation that Germans and Europeans are merely 'free riders' of US military strength cannot completely be dismissed.

So, if EU member states – the second largest economic area in the world with over 500 million people – were to expand their capabilities for securing the sea routes and undertake this in cooperation within the framework of a common security concept, they would show that they were living up to their responsibilities. The EU also needs a global political vision and a long-term geostrategic perspective as an independent alternative between 'Americanisation' and the Chinese dream in order to gain acceptance on the international stage and, above all, to defend its own interests. All of this also against the background that we



*The Gulf of Oman with the Strait of Hormuz, here photographed at night from the International Space Station, is one of the world's most sensitive choke points.*

are tending towards a world order in which there is no longer a guardian, but rather five metropolitan areas: USA, China, Russia, India and the Europeans!

We live in volatile and demanding times when it comes to defence policy. The security environment that we believe to take advantage of is only a virtual one. That makes it all the more important that EU member states should now take responsibility and finally expand their ability to safeguard German economic interests within the framework of a common security concept. They finally owe this to the business community but also to their citizens.

Certainly the 56<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference offers the opportunity for governments to discuss such a concept.