

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

Isolationism or cooperation?

What the Munich Security Conference tells us about the international order in early 2019

By Jörn Grävingholt,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 18 February 2019

What the Munich Security Conference tells us about the international order in early 2019

Bonn, 18 February 2019. "The old is dying and the new cannot be born": Ever since last weekend's Munich Security Conference (MSC), this quote from Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci has been on everyone's lips. It was chosen to describe the crisis in which the international order finds itself in early 2019. A sense of alarm is spreading. From a European perspective at least, the familiar list of flashpoints in recent years (Syria, Yemen, Iran, Ukraine; Brexit, Trump, trade wars) now has a new addition: The INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty concluded between the United States and the USSR in 1987 is on the brink of being scrapped. Concerns are being expressed about a new arms race and a return to the atomic bomb. And as the number of globally contentious issues increases, key actors such as Russia and the United States are becoming less willing to find solutions, propagating isolationism and confrontation instead.

The sense of a loss of order is not new. Five years ago, then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier spoke of a world "out of joint". At that time, Russia had annexed Crimea. It would now seem that the crisis has eaten its way into the core of the liberal world order. The UK is sliding into Brexit without a plan because its political class believes it can make the world simpler than it is. US President Trump is indefatigable in expressing his disdain for the law and the constitution, and is in the process verbally destroying the dividing line between liberal democracies and populist autocracies. This is a road that Poland and Hungary are also advancing down, with an uncertain outcome.

Given this situation, the foreseeable end of the INF Treaty has led in recent weeks to intensive discussions about military and other security-policy responses. At times, there has even seemed to be a certain sense of relief in the air to be talking once more about classic issues such as warheads, deterrents and the range of missiles after all the years of complicated deliberations on an expanded definition of security. Here at last was a problem that you could at least describe using familiar terminology. For this reason alone, the debate on nuclear armament in Europe has the potential to capture a great deal of political and public attention. However, a one-sided fixation on armament and weapons systems would be fatal.

After all, it would not eliminate the challenge of establishing a new global order that allows us to tackle the major future questions facing humanity (climate change, global participation). Consequent-

ly, it was important that leading European representatives, most notably EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, explicitly advocated a modern security policy in Munich, one that goes beyond military matters and incorporates among other things development, climate and trade policy, diplomacy and cybersecurity.

Something that received less attention at the MSC was the non-military efforts that have long been financed by the EU, Germany and many other donors to stabilise and consolidate peace processes following armed conflict around the world. These efforts also play a key role in promoting a peaceful global order. Contrary to the way classic security policy-makers often make it appear with their hard realism, civil peacebuilding is no idealistic dream. Indeed, recent research by the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) shows that international peace support pays off in countries that have experienced civil war. While not guaranteed, there is a realistic prospect of success if the right foundations for external assistance are laid early on, as was done in the West African nations of Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 2000s. By contrast, if there is no substantial engagement with the issues, as was the case in Chad, Uganda and Yemen, then the result is almost always a return to violence. A comprehensive package of support measures that combines political action and economic assistance with a commitment to providing support for overcoming lines of conflict within societies and creating security for people can make a particular contribution to securing peace.

It is especially noteworthy that, where conflict parties have agreed to implement democratic rules in future in place of armed confrontation, external support for institutions that facilitate fair competition and also effectively limit the exercise of power can be decisive. Such institutions help to ensure that the democratic interplay between victory and defeat facilitates cooperation between hitherto unreconciled opponents rather than giving rise to fresh violence.

Nothing reduces the risk of violent conflict in a society more than effective institutions that treat all stakeholders fairly. This finding from peacebuilding should also serve as a general guideline for action. The "new" global order sought after in Munich will require cooperative institutions. Isolationism and confrontation will not help in this endeavour.