

PEACE IS A HUMAN RIGHT

THE NEED TO MAKE AND KEEP PEACE

Gregor Gysi

THE attack by the Russian Federation on Ukraine represents a turning point for politics in Europe. Not only is the existence of a sovereign country and a member of the United Nations being threatened and unimaginable violence used against civilians, but the attack also has far-reaching consequences for Europe and beyond. Reaching an understanding with Russia at this point seems to have become impossible, at least in the medium term—or as long as Putin is in power. The war continues to result in rearmament, strengthening of NATO, and runaway alienation between the blocs composed of the United States and the EU on the one hand and Russia and China on the other. The unfolding events are increasingly unpredictable, and their impact is profound. In this essay, I point out some lines of developments, which are meant to remind everyone of the value of peace, highlighting that

the task of politics is, among other things, to understand this as a priority.

As a democratic socialist, I stand up for universal human rights worldwide and the right of all citizens to enjoy them. In this context, I like to remind the ruling bourgeois parties in my country and in the European Union that social security is also a human right. In Western democracies, important as they are, too much focus is placed on political freedoms. Another elementary aspect of human coexistence that was underrepresented in the thinking and actions of Western politics—until Russia's attack on Ukraine—was peace.

There are very significant international documents on the fundamental importance of peace for mankind. The Charter of the United Nations, written in the aftermath of World War II, formulates the goal of “protecting future generations from

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The author in conversation with colleagues

the scourge of war.” The Charter obliges all member states to resolve conflicts peacefully. Article 1 clearly states the goal

to maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.

In other words: the principle of peace is higher than the prohibition of war.

The 2019 UN Declaration on the Right to Peace (UN Resolution 71/189) goes even further and defines peace as a human right. Supplemented by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, the conceptual issues of conflict and war prevention are laid out, making the documents a very good blueprint for how peace could be achieved and preserved. The Final Act (Helsinki Accords) of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe is also a remarkable text that provides many good starting points for dealing with conflicts in international politics.

As evident from the documents mentioned previously, and numerous other examples, people are capable of learning to formulate correct content that is conducive to peace. But states often do not behave towards one another in accordance with historical lessons or the UN Charter—at least not until they are “forced” to do so by their own constitution and civil society.

The well-known German social democrat Egon Bahr, co-architect of Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik, once said to schoolchildren: “International politics is never about democracy or human rights. It is about the interests of states. Remember that no matter what you are told in history class.” While this is a bit too absolute, I agree with the essence of his statement. In his view, aggression and even wars of aggression can also emanate from democracies.

However, a way of dealing with the fixation on interest-based politics could still be found. Rather, I see it as a bigger problem that power politics, as a way to achieve one’s own goals, is chosen more often than balancing of interests or compromise. The fact that Putin has decided to go down this path—not for the first time, but now in a particularly brutal and momentous manner—has

come as a surprise to many. The inner logic behind it might be that international law, which is intended to protect the weak from the strong and sanction wars of aggression, has too often been proven worthless. The deficits in the structure of the UN Security Council and the lack of willingness among its members to reach an understanding has again strengthened the rule of thumb in international relations.

After the end of the Cold War and many years before Russia’s attack on Ukraine, the United States and the American-led NATO were guilty of waging a war of aggression in violation of international law against Yugoslavia in 1999. In 2003, permanent members of the UN Security Council, the U.S. and the UK, together with their coalition partners, launched the Invasion of Iraq.

Waging an unlawful war in Iraq poses a burden on the United States in its attempt to unite the world against Russian aggression today. Key protagonists of international politics such as China, India, and Brazil—but also other states such as South Africa and Indonesia—are concentrating more on helping to achieve a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine and less on establishing full territorial

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integrity and thus a victory for Ukraine. They are not convinced by the moral arguments presented by the United States due to its past actions, and because they see Washington’s striving for hegemony as counterproductive for the development of a multilateral world order.

Today, amidst the shock of the war in Ukraine, one hears that war has returned to Europe “for the first time” since 1945. Well, that is not true. This is exactly what was said in the 1990s, during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. These wars began with the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After the conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were settled, the long-smoldering conflict in Kosovo between the “Kosovo Liberation Army”—which was fighting for the independence of Kosovo—and the Serbian government flared up. Alluding to an imminent genocide by the Serbian forces, NATO intervened in the civil war. After the end of NATO hostilities, Kosovo was occupied by NATO troops and the provisional authorities of self-government in Kosovo were created. Later, when the attempts to find a political solution to the conflict within the framework of the state as a whole failed, the “Contact Group” switched to a different model: namely to

enable Kosovo to form its own state and declare independence from Serbia. This was not possible under international law, since Serbia would never have accepted the associated violation of its territorial integrity—and has not accepted it to this day. Still, it was possible in terms of power politics. This also violated an existing resolution of the UN Security Council (Resolution 1244), which granted Kosovo a high degree of autonomy, while at the same time requiring that it remains a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, i.e. Serbia. It is important to note that the International Court of Justice did not recognize Kosovo’s sovereignty. While issuing an advisory opinion on Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence, it merely ruled that a corresponding declaration was not contrary to international law. However, it did not decide that the UN or other countries may recognize Kosovo as a separate state. Yet, with NATO occupying Kosovo and Serbia not wanting another war, the current situation came about.

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that the Putin I listened deliver the 2001 speech in the German Bundestag seemed different from the chauvinistic warlord of today.

All the mistakes of the West do not justify Russia's actions. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council,

an important partner in preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power, and a country rich in natural resources, Russia has many different options to assert its interests rather than trying to do so with military force. That is why the

attack on Ukraine is inexcusable. The mistakes committed by the West only raise the question of whether we would be standing somewhere else today if they had acted differently. Again, international politics does not operate from a moral point of view, and every breach of international law weakens it further and invites imitators onto the scene.

Guided by the peace imperative of the UN Charter described above, I support promising approaches that could lead to a ceasefire—including those made by China or Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

As a German and European politician, I cannot take a position of equidistance on the war: I stand in

solidarity with Ukraine, and it is perfectly clear to me that the country's right to self-defense under international law must be supported. I reject arms deliveries from Germany and believe that this would not do justice to our history. The worst war ever fought was World War II, and I want Germany never to earn money from weapons again.

What I find wrong, to say the least, is how the efforts of China, Brazil, and others are being brushed aside and dismissed by German, European, and American politicians as well as

the media. Even if countries have their own interests and view the conflict differently, their efforts to bring the fighting to an end and reach a ceasefire are respectable and worth considering.

I think there is another reason why it is important to allow multiple positions on the war, provided they are supported by the will to end it as soon as possible. If we want to prevent a deep division in our society, we should respect those who seek to strengthen Ukraine's right to self-defense by supplying arms and not see them as warmongers.

But those—and I count myself among them—who want an immediate ceasefire, want the killing, harm, and destruction to end instantly. It is therefore

just as wrong to present this position as pro-Putin. We now have a trench war in Ukraine. The President of the German foreign intelligence service BND Bruno Kahl pointed out that Russia could still recruit up to one million soldiers, while Ukraine does not have such a far-stretching possibility.

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas explained that NATO has not yet defined its goal. He went on to say that there is a difference between whether a country must win and whether it must not lose. That is an interesting thought.

Since Putin appears unprepared to accept a ceasefire, my suggestion would be the following: with the agreement of the Ukrainian leadership, NATO could declare not to deliver a single weapon to Ukraine for a certain period of time if the Russian leadership agreed to a ceasefire. This would put Russia under a lot of pressure. The result of the peace negotiations must then be a Ukraine that is also secured by the West.

Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to predict when and how the war in Ukraine will end. My hopes that this will happen soon are invigorated by

the developments in Yemen: after eight years, an end to the war seems possible—without a prior change in the external circumstances or political priorities of the direct and indirect belligerents. Thanks to China's mediation, a rapprochement of Iran and Saudi Arabia has taken place.

It makes sense to put the issue of peace, in all its complexity, at the top of the political agenda. For example, I understand Finland's accession to NATO and Sweden's application for membership—this step improves the security situation of both countries in the short term—but does the

strengthening of military alliances and permanent rearmament actually lead to more security?

After the end of the war in Ukraine, the UN or the Vatican should invite people to an international peace conference. We need a renewal of the will for peace in the international community—if we don't succeed in this, the conflicts will only escalate and become unmanageable.

Take the tensions between the United States and China, for example. Former U.S. President Barack Obama had already changed his country's military

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doctrine and defined the Pacific region as a top strategic interest. China, on the other hand, has considerably upgraded its military in recent years and is pursuing a more aggressive foreign policy than in the recent past. So, does it make sense to see China as a “systemic rival,” as the German government does, for example? Will it also be possible for the “Western community of values,” to which the German government subscribes, to continue to shape global politics according to its own views and interests?

In my opinion, it would not, due to the significantly increased political weight and economic power of China and countries of the Global South. I wouldn’t think it would be justified either, since the UN Security Council, the World Bank, and the globalized economy were built in the interest of the victorious powers of World War II. Today’s world is different, however, and President Lula’s proposals to equate other currencies with the U.S. dollar are just as worth considering as French President Emmanuel Macron’s demands for greater foreign policy independence of the EU and its member states from the United States—especially vis-à-vis China.

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We live in a time of upheaval, and as history shows, such phases have often been accompanied by wars. It is the most important task of politics to prevent this and achieve, secure, and strengthen peace instead. The West’s demands for democratization and freedom directed towards China and other countries would gain credibility if the former also allowed the international system to become democratized and shaped as a truly multilateral world.

As I have repeatedly pointed out, Russia’s aggression must be strongly condemned. I am just advocating not to draw all the wrong conclusions from it. Focusing on peace, disarmament, and civil structures is not an appeasement of Putin. It is an investment in a more peaceful future. Shaping the future will be complicated and I can only hope that the forces of peace, democracy, freedom, de-escalation, disarmament, reconciliation of interests, and substantially more diplomacy from all sides can come together. With strict observance of international law, the world could still usher in an era of new internationalism and become stronger. ●