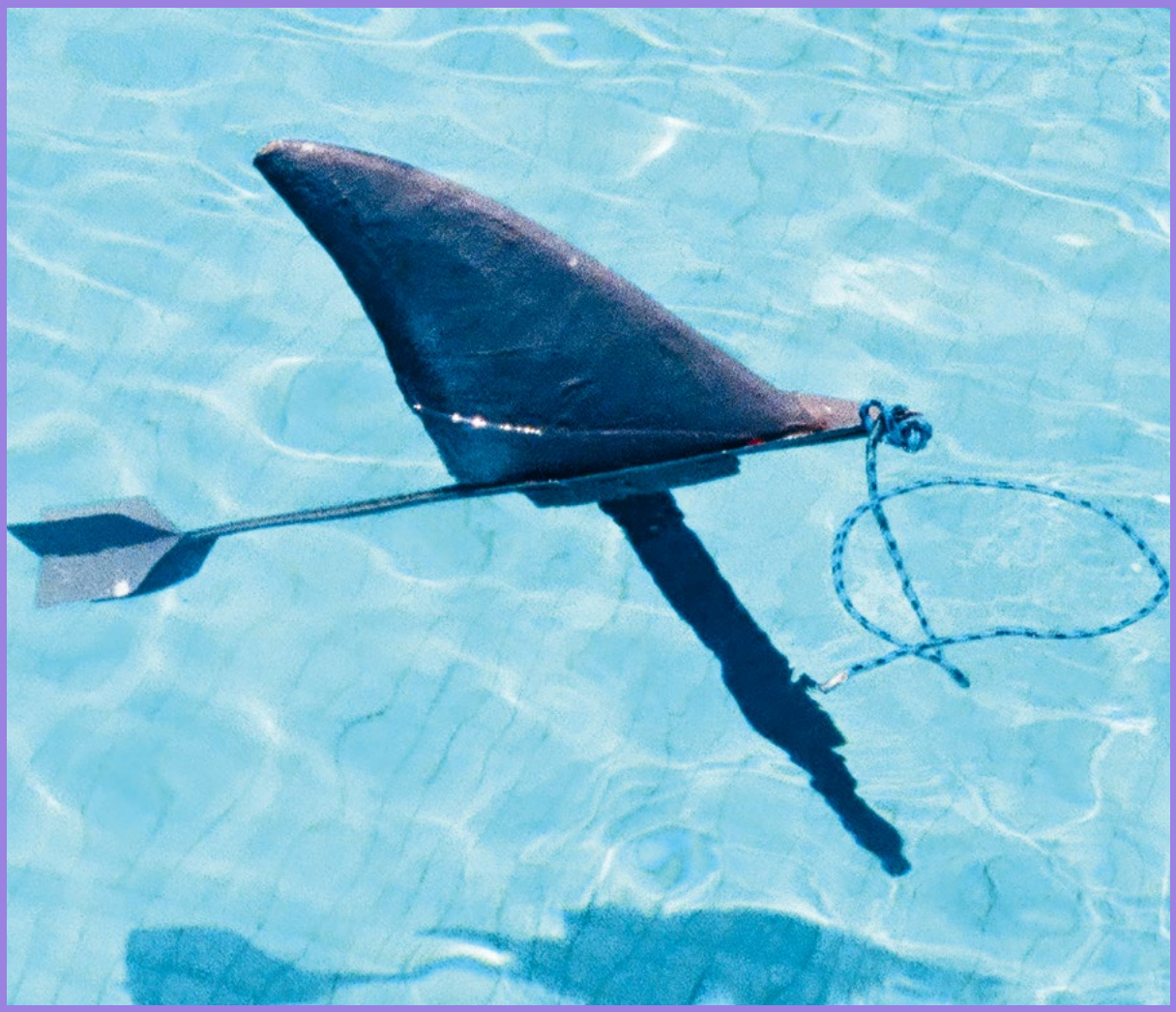
Navigating Power and Principles!

BKHS
MAGAZINE

06





DEAR READERS,

TEXT: ELISABETH WINTER

Power politics may never have disappeared, but today it is once again dominating the global stage, eroding international norms and testing liberal democracies in the process. Democracies everywhere face a challenge: preserving their own strategic agency while upholding the normative foundations of the international order. While the EU has thus far been able to resist the growing threats from within and abroad, shifting transatlantic dynamics, multiplying security crises and economic fragmentation are forcing it into direct competition with authoritarian powers. At the heart of this contest lies a vital question: Where does pragmatic cooperation remain viable, and where must firm ethical boundaries be drawn?

The call to "Navigate Power and Principles!" reflects a growing reality: the boundaries between strategic interest and moral commitment are blurring. For an EU accustomed to viewing itself as a bastion of liberal-democratic values, the current environment demands that it move beyond the false dichotomy between naive idealism and raw realpolitik. In today's geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape, security policy is inextricably bound to social and economic policy. Principles are a source of power rather than an impediment to it. Ultimately, democratic survival hinges on reconciling hard strategic interests with an unyielding normative core.

Navigating this reality demands intellectual honesty about unavoidable compromises without losing sight of core values. History demonstrates that dialogue between democracies and autocracies can build practical trust yet reach firm limits when human rights and legal principles are at stake. Upholding international law and ethical principles of peace is not moral posturing, but an essential safeguard against the rule of raw force. It is equally crucial to ensure that humanitarian action ceases to compensate for political failure at different levels to help those most in need. As several contributions highlight, true resilience requires both external resolve and internal strength. Democracies must recognise that gender equality, social infrastructure and corporate responsibility are core security assets; reclaim the digital public sphere from disinformation; and address hybrid threats without compromising the openness of their societies.

This balancing act extends to Europe's global partnerships. Building resilient international alliances requires moving beyond one-sided lecturing towards genuine, reciprocal learning with key democratic middle powers like India and South Korea, who share the responsibility and the burden of shaping a cooperative multipolar order. Translating democratic principles into strategic capability is the defining challenge of our time — and the common thread running through this issue. In tandem with the Helmut Schmidt Lecture 2026, the sixth issue of the BKHS Magazine examines how Europe can navigate an increasingly volatile landscape without sacrificing its normative compass. We are honoured to feature Ivan Krastev as this year's speaker. Renowned for his analysis of how open societies can defend themselves in an illiberal world without surrendering their core values, Ivan Krastev brings an invaluable perspective to this debate.

Our contributors explore these themes in their work across media and disciplines. Personal reflections highlight how individuals cultivate a higher tolerance for ambiguity amid global upheaval. The issue also features visual accounts of civil sea rescue, an exploration of political education through games, insights on business leadership and reflections on democratic accountability. These contributions show that wielding power and maintaining a normative compass are inseparable — inviting readers to confront uncomfortable dilemmas and rethink what it means to lead with power and purpose.

→ Elisabeth Winter is deputy managing director and programme director for Global Markets and Social Justice at the BKHS.

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What does "Navigating Power and Principles" mean to you?

It was always my hope that we could prove Hamlet wrong – that doubt need not be the enemy of decision, that a person could hold principles seriously, see the case against them clearly, and still act. Navigating between power and principles depends less on any one formula than on a single virtue: intellectual honesty. We are constantly tempted to describe a compromise as an act of principle rather than admit it as a compromise. So, navigation begins with a simple rule: do not lie to yourself about what you are doing.

The post-9/11 torture debate remains the clearest illustration of the dilemma. Americans argued, patiently and in earnest, over whether torture was permissible if they knew the person in custody held knowledge that could save thousands of lives within a day. This was the classic collision between an absolute prohibition – never torture – and the imperative to protect the innocent. In this case, the answer I have found most honest is this: if no other option remains, you may torture, but you must never legalise it. Do it, if you must, as an act of civil disobedience, in the full knowledge that it is a crime, and be prepared to answer for it – in court, in public, before history.

This is the difference between compromising a principle and abolishing it. The moment you legalise the exception, torture stops being a tragic, personal transgression and becomes policy – available to the next official, for a lesser reason, with no one left willing to call it a crime at all. Principles survive contact with power only when the violator, not the rule, bears the cost.

Ivan Krastev is chairman of the board of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna and speaker of the Helmut Schmidt Lecture 2026.

HOW A GEOPOLITICAL EUROPE UNDERCUTS



ITS SOFT POWER ADVANTAGE

The EU is responding to an increasingly geopolitical and multipolar world by abandoning its principled foreign policy in favour of a more pragmatic and self-centred approach. However, Europe will not match the hard power of the US or China anytime soon and, in the process, it risks undermining its superior soft power. Instead, the EU should embrace this advantage and take the lead in renewing the rules-based order.

TEXT: TIM HEINKELMANN-WILD

Europe can no longer rely on the US for security guarantees and multilateral leadership. Since the end of the Cold War, Europe has enjoyed economic prosperity while investing relatively little in hard power. It focused on soft power, committed to the principles of the rules-based order it co-created with the US and invested in multilateral institutions as well as in its relations with other countries through aid and foreign cultural and educational policy. Under Donald Trump, the US has turned to unilateralism, transactionalism and open hostility towards European partners and international law. In addition, Europe faces severe pressure from Russia's military revisionism and increasing economic competition from a rising China. As geopolitical rivalries intensify and power diffuses away from the West, the EU and its member states face a crucial decision: How can they reorient European foreign and security policy to be fit for an uncertain future?

Europe's geopolitical turn

The emerging European consensus seems to be that the rules-based order "will not return" and "Europe can no longer be a custodian for the old-world order". In the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Europe instead needs "a more realistic and interest-driven foreign policy" (European Commission, 2026). The EU's geopolitical turn entails an increased emphasis on unilateral instruments, such as the use of its regulatory and sanctioning powers, as well as on national capacity-building, especially in defence.

"Its superior soft power provides Europe with a unique opportunity to establish itself as a hub for cooperation among small and middle powers and to adapt multilateral institutions to new demands."

Traditional principles are being overwritten by pragmatic considerations. While cutting its contributions to multilateral institutions, aid and foreign cultural and educational policy, the EU is shifting towards new initiatives, such as the Team Europe Approach and Global Gateway, which focus on advancing narrower economic interests. To appease President Trump, the EU and its member states have largely remained silent about clear breaches of international law, such as the US attacks on Iran and Venezuela, and they have agreed to the EU–US Turnberry Deal, which undermines free trade rules.

The internal limitations of a geopolitical Europe

Europe should, of course, invest more in its hard power to provide for its own security and reduce one-sided dependencies. However, Europe's geopolitical ambitions face serious constraints. The EU is a bloc of 27 small- and medium-sized democracies that must jointly set foreign and security policy. Even in the policy field of trade, where decision-making is centralised in the Commission, its ability to act assertively towards Russia, China or the US has remained limited.

Individual member states, even Germany and France, are too weak to become great powers. Ad hoc coalitions of the powerful offer only a short-term workaround and are likely to breed long-term resistance from those they exclude.

Crucially, as long as there is a chance that the US stays committed to NATO, it remains the superior defence alliance, and Europeans will not risk forgoing it. For the foreseeable future, the EU's capacity to become an independent geopolitical player remains limited.

The external costs of a geopolitical Europe

Embracing a more self-centred, pragmatic foreign policy has also proven costly internationally. Developing countries have already felt the shift. For instance, African Union leaders initially pushed back hard against the EU's Global Gateway initiative for offering little new aid while neglecting local industrialisation in favour of Europe's geopolitical goals.

Europe's inconsistent application of international law, for example, in regard to Russia's war in Ukraine and Israel's in Gaza, also drew wider criticism from the Global South. The EU, in turn, struggled to rally support for Ukraine in the UN General Assembly. Germany's failed bid for a seat on the Security Council may have been yet another result of this declining credibility.

Europe's continued shift away from multilateral aid and its international institutions, despite the global challenges posed by the second Trump administration's abandonment of international aid, has accelerated the crises of the rules-based order. Thus, Europe's geopolitical turn is already having tangible consequences.

Europe's soft power advantage

However, it is not too late for Europe or the rules-based order. The criticism of European double standards can also be read as testimony to the fact that most states still believe in the order's principles and hold the EU to a high standard. Europe still enjoys trust and credibility as a steward of multilateral cooperation, and compared to Trump's America and an authoritarian China, its soft power stands out (MacDonald & Murray, 2026).

Its superior soft power provides Europe with a unique opportunity to establish itself as a hub for cooperation among small and middle powers and to adapt multilateral institutions to new demands. It has, in fact, already leveraged that asset in the past to fill the leadership gap left by the US and to pursue its goals within multilateral institutions alongside partners from the Global South. When the US, during Trump's first term, paralysed the dispute settlement system of the World Trade Organisation, the EU drew on its reputation of being a steward of the multilateral trading order to take the lead in establishing an alternative. It successfully rallied a coalition of major trading powers, including China, that agreed to stick to rules-based cooperation (Heinkelmann-Wild, 2026).

Europe's convening capacity as a hub for cooperation will only grow more valuable. As the US-China rivalry intensifies, both powers will avoid taking the lead on the provision of global public goods, such as fighting climate change, preventing pandemics and regulating new technologies. The very inability of the EU to compete on their terms may make it a more credible alternative to the US or China as a multilateral leader. At the same time, the global diffusion of power means that addressing these challenges increasingly requires broader coalitions. Many states share Europe's stake in an order that provides weaker states with recognition, participation and reliable procedures.

Rather than chasing great-power status or taking sides between the US and China, Europe could thrive as a trusted bridgebuilder and facilitator of global problem-solving at the margins of their contest. A return to a more principled foreign policy can thus help the EU become a central player in the renewal of the rules-based order.

→ Tim Heinkelmann-Wild is a political scientist at LMU Munich's Geschwister Scholl Institute.

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Four Questions

ANSWERED BY JANINA KUGEL



Janina Kugel is a German business executive, advisor and holds positions on several boards. She is also a member of the International Advisory Board of the BKHS.

1. Does Europe's commitment to fundamental values strengthen its long-term competitiveness — or risk slowing economic growth compared to other global powers?

The fundamental beliefs of the EU are values that should not be given up lightly. Global competitiveness though requires careful consideration of adequate regulations and limited bureaucracy to allow companies to be globally competitive. Unlocking the real power of Europe's competitiveness would require a reduction of nationalistic actions and a shift to a unified powerful single market.

2. How can businesses take on responsibilities in domestic and foreign policy to help navigate power and principles?

Companies play an important role in society, but foreign policy is set by governments. Businesses operate within the regulatory frameworks and policies those governments establish. Companies must stay competitive and profitable, but every company can choose which markets to enter, which margins to target and which standards to set.

3. How can corporate leaders successfully embed principles like democracy and gender equality into their organisational culture?

Democracy is a political system based on voting, representation and the distribution of power. Companies though are fundamentally hierarchical – one way or the other. But I believe that a successful organisation is one that attracts and retains the best talent and fosters an innovative and thriving culture. To make this happen, a leadership style is required that allows employees to bring in their best ideas independent of their gender, ethnicity or background. When diverse perspectives inform decisions, companies will flourish.

4. How do you reconcile economic performance with moral foundations?

I personally think that the use of the term "moral" is inherently difficult as it doesn't carry a fixed definition and varies according to cultural norms and personal values. But certainly, every company must have clearly defined business conduct guidelines that set rules and ethical principles to ensure compliant, integral and appropriate behaviour in business.



Helmut Schmidt 1996 in his book *"Weggefährten – Erinnerungen und Reflexionen"*

"In fundamental matters, one must be naive. And I am of the opinion that the problems of the world and humanity cannot be solved without idealism. Nevertheless, I believe that one should at the same time be realistic and pragmatic."

Helmut Schmidt was often described as a pragmatist – but never as one without principles. Throughout his political life, he grappled with the relationship between intellectual conviction and political responsibility, drawing on thinkers such as Mark Aurel, Immanuel Kant, Max Weber and Karl Popper. His approach was shaped by reason, a strong sense of duty and the conviction that political action must ultimately serve ethical purposes. During renewed Cold War tensions in the late 1970s, for example, Schmidt pursued arms control agreements and dialogue with the Soviet Union while also advocating for a credible Western deterrent – a difficult balancing act between the pursuit of peace and the realities of security. As questions of war, peace and security are once again leaving policymakers confronted with difficult choices, this tension remains just as relevant today. This year, Helmut Schmidt steps aside to give the stage to a diverse range of peace ethicists in Germany. We posed them the question: ***"What should guide decision-making when principles and political realities point in different directions?"***

The long game for international law: lessons from Lviv



Earlier this year, I travelled with a colleague to the Ukrainian city of Lviv. While Russian missiles were threatening a city renowned as the home of many influential international lawyers, local lawyers were planning a new centre dedicated to strengthening the very legal order under attack. Their determination offers an unexpected lesson: in an age of authoritarian power politics, international law matters more – not less.

TEXT: MAXIM BÖNNEMANN

Lviv lies at the westernmost edge of the country, far from the rumble of the front. Delicate Art Nouveau buildings and fragrant coffee houses echo the city's Habsburg heritage. But there are also numerous traces of its Polish and Soviet past, as well as its rich Jewish tradition. Lviv, in fact, brings together so many architectural styles that UNESCO declared much of its historic core a World Heritage Site in 1998.

When we stepped off the train, we had no idea that the city was about to face a wave of Russian attacks, beginning with the launch of the notorious Oreshnik hypersonic missile. Later that spring, even the centuries-old Church of St Andrew was hit. UNESCO issued a statement, but no one believed that yet another condemnation of Russia's conduct of the war as a grave violation of international law would have any effect on the course of the fighting.

At first glance, the events in Lviv seemed to confirm a broader observation: the international legal order is crumbling. Fundamental norms go unheeded, judicial rulings are dismissed and condemnations like UNESCO's by now carry little more than symbolic weight. This seems especially true in regard to the law of armed force, with battle-related deaths and rampant violations of civilian protections on the rise worldwide. So, is the era of international law as a vehicle for global coordination and order drawing to a close? Is it even worth continuing to insist on compliance with international law? To answer these questions, it helps to turn once more to Ukraine. The country's experience and its strategies under wartime conditions, I believe, hold valuable lessons for any state seeking to push back against the growing power of authoritarian systems.

A lesson from Lviv

Lviv is known not only for its architecture but also for its rich tradition in international law. Hersch Lauterpacht, who studied at Lviv's Faculty of Law between 1915 and 1919, later became a judge at the International Court of Justice as well as the doctrinal architect of the international criminal law concept of "crimes against humanity". He was instrumental in incorporating the crime into the indictments at Nuremberg. In the same building, Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term "genocide", walked the corridors as a student. One of the twentieth century's greatest American international lawyers, Louis B Sohn, likewise studied in Lviv before going on to help draft the UN Charter. Today, Lviv takes pride in its international legal tradition. But more importantly, the spirit of that tradition is still very much alive, and it has the potential to inspire lawyers and politicians well beyond Ukraine's borders.

When I spoke with a well-connected lawyer in Lviv, he pushed back against the premise that international law is dead. Yes, there are grave violations of international law. But that, he argued, is even more of a reason to think harder about how to renew and develop it further. To translate this resolve into action, a group of lawyers in Lviv is currently working on a bold idea: establishing a centre for international law tasked with advancing novel legal frameworks for aggression, accountability, reparations and occupation. Further, in the critical spirit of the city's intellectual ancestors, the centre wants to address larger questions, such as how to reform the post-1945 order to reduce the growing number of violations of the prohibition on the use of force.

"It is precisely this utopian spirit that has produced the great milestones of international law in the twentieth century."

For now, the centre exists only as an idea on paper. However, it already has prominent backers, among them this year's recipient of the Peace Prize of the German Book, Philippe Sands, the Ukrainian Nobel laureate, Oleksandra Matviichuk, and the mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovyi. For the centre to become reality, it needs funders willing to finance a think tank in a city where air-raid alerts still regularly sound at night. But the very idea of establishing such a centre in the midst of war speaks to a broader Ukrainian approach to international law – one that offers lessons relevant to the BKHS Magazine's theme this year. Let me sketch three of them.

COURAGE

First, courage. In a world in which military and economic power is once again becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of authoritarian great powers, a sense of helplessness, fear and resignation can quickly become dominant. Great powers like to weaponise threats – from punitive tariffs to sanctions or even military interventions. The assumption that smaller states will bend to their will is part of the calculation. But Ukraine shows how wrong that calculation can be.

Ukraine also demonstrates that democracies can possess decisive advantages over autocratic systems: they are more agile, innovative and capable of learning quickly from mistakes. When these strengths are combined with courage – a quality that has, unfortunately, grown rarer in politics – the result can be a force that even authoritarian great powers cannot simply brush aside. This is all the more true when democratic states cooperate with one another beyond the protective umbrella of a single great power, thereby adding a democratic axis to the often-noted new importance of middle powers.

PERSEVERANCE

Second, perseverance. The fact that unlawful acts and crimes under international law currently go unpunished does not mean that they will remain so forever. Lviv's lawyers are involved in documenting the damage and crimes of the war, and they are pursuing reparations claims in innovative ways because they know that the status quo can shift. History has repeatedly shown that systems that appear stable for long periods can rapidly change. Political and military leaders who, when they committed their crimes, appeared safe from prosecution and accountability have found themselves in prison years later – either as a result of arrest warrants issued by an international criminal court or because of domestic political changes.

But perseverance matters beyond Ukraine, too, as an essential quality in today's geopolitical landscape. It means, for example, continuing to draw attention to grave violations of international law, even when the political impact of such statements is not immediately apparent. The more states around the world slide into authoritarianism, the more important it becomes for political leaders – and scholars, for that matter – to keep the principles of international law and human rights alive, even when doing so can, at times, feel like tilting at windmills.

CONSISTENCY

Third and finally, principled consistency. International law matters only if it applies to everyone. As in domestic legal systems, law that is selectively applied quickly loses legitimacy at the international level as well. When governments openly apply double standards, it weakens both their own standing within the international system and the international legal order as a whole.

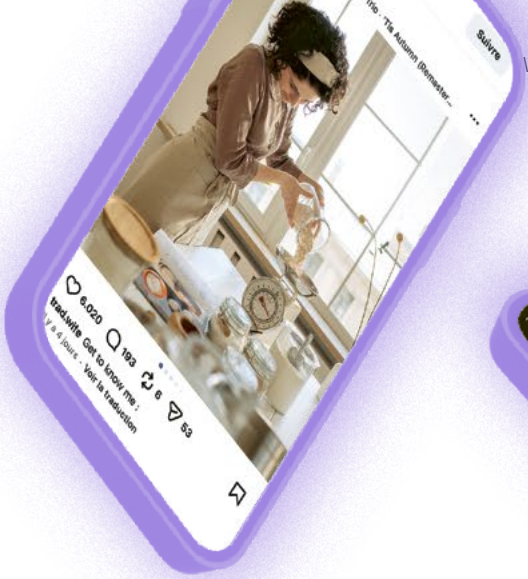
The case for utopia

To some, it may seem naïve to spend one's days working on the establishment of a centre for international law while, at night, sirens blare and drones strike. But it is precisely this utopian spirit that has produced the great milestones of international law in the twentieth century, from the founding of the UN and the creation of modern human rights treaties to the establishment of institutions like the International Court of Justice.

Some liberal democracies are increasingly turning towards a form of political realism in which legality is treated as little more than a soft factor. In the face of the gravest war crimes, that approach is not merely ethically wrong. For small- and medium-sized states, such a strategy also runs counter to their own interests because it is precisely these states that depend on a reliable global legal system in which the law applies equally to all. Sounds utopian? If so, that's one more reason to get to work.

→ Maxim Bönnemann is the chief editor of Verfassungsblog, a globally leading platform for constitutional and international law.

← VERFASSUNGSBLOG IS A GLOBAL OPEN-ACCESS FORUM FOR LEGAL AND POLITICAL DEBATE ABOUT DEVELOPMENTS IN PUBLIC LAW AT THE INTERFACE OF ACADEMIA AND SOCIETY





BEYOND SOURDOUGH AND SKINCARE: HOW DEMOCRACY CAN RECLAIM SOCIAL MEDIA





Seemingly harmless lifestyle content on social media can also serve as a vehicle for carefully crafted political messages. The far right in particular is applying this strategy with huge success. Why do pro-democratic actors struggle to compete with them online? We offer five ideas on how to build authentic and effective democratic communication.

TEXT: ALISA RIETH & MERLE STRUNK

In a perfectly equipped kitchen, a woman in a floral dress calmly explains each step of how to bake sourdough bread. At the end of the video, she encourages viewers to try out the recipe and to post their results. Lifestyle videos such as this are common on social media. Besides recipes, they also offer cleaning hacks, skincare routines or parenting advice. Some feature so-called "tradwives" ("traditional wives") who offer not only personal insights into everyday family life but also, at times, a vision of society in which women's sole roles are to be dutiful homemakers and devoted mothers.

Beyond promoting traditional gender roles, such videos can convey far-right values – through deliberate messaging or unintentional alignment with far-right narratives. Tradwife content is only one example of a broader trend on social media in which entertainment, product advertising, lifestyle and politics merge. This makes it easier for political influencers to "microdose" their content for their followers and weave it into seemingly harmless everyday stories and interactive trends.

Strategic use by the far right

Far-right actors have long recognised the potential of social media and make strategic use of it. Their content reaches millions of people on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, actively contributing to the normalisation of racism, antisemitism and hate speech. The far right is shaping the pre-political online sphere – with grave consequences for public discourse, political dynamics and even electoral outcomes.

The common response among pro-democratic actors has been a call to "win back" the internet. This assumes that the digital sphere was once inherently democratic, and it overlooks how political recruitment works. People with no prior interest in politics do not suddenly become politically engaged because they happen to watch a perfectly choreographed TikTok by a political influencer. Nor do they immediately begin following Maximilian Krah or the Identitarian movement. Instead, they are led through a gradual, emotionally driven pipeline from lifestyle content to explicit political messaging. On the pro-democratic side, however, an analogous pipeline is remarkably difficult to find. Why?

Weak spots of pro-democratic engagement

One explanation concerns a missed opportunity during the rise of social media. Progressive and pro-democratic voices, whether publications or political figures, often failed to make the transition to the digital world in time. One example is given by TikTok, where right-wing actors gained an early advantage by building large audiences while also shaping the platform's culture to serve their own interests.

A further obstacle is the widespread unease among pro-democratic actors about openly promoting values, building personal brands or achieving commercial success. Clear political messaging is sometimes seen as moralising. Successful content creators are viewed with suspicion simply because they monetise their reach, while conservative influencers confidently combine political advocacy with commercial success. As a result, many pro-democratic content creators struggle to navigate the relationship between their power and principles online.

But one of the most significant difficulties is the absence of a shared vision that unites diverse audiences. Democracies thrive on debate, disagreement and pluralism. Their strength lies in the negotiation of competing values rather than in a single narrative. But that very complexity makes it difficult to "communicate" democracy through a handful of slogans or aspirational images that can effortlessly blend into lifestyle content. The complexity of democratic societies rarely lends itself to brevity. Yet brevity is what is essential in digital communication.

No more playing catch-up

Should democratic actors simply try to copy the strategies of the far right? Rather not. A more productive question is: What can we do to help pro-democratic content creators succeed on their own terms?

1. Support content creators through our participation: We are part of the communication on social media. If you come across content creators (whether fully or just slightly politically engaged) who highlight diverse democratic perspectives, you should follow them and engage with their posts. Help amplify their reach. Take advantage of the opportunities to share your perspective and start conversations with others.

2. Adjust expectations and tolerate contradictions: Engage with the content of, for example, a cooking influencer who occasionally discusses the history and cultural significance of recipes, touches on questions of migration and thereby encourages reflection about inclusion and belonging. This kind of low-threshold civic education can have enormous democratic value – without commenting on every political issue or perfectly reflecting diverse positions.

3. Rebuild our capacity for complexity: It's easy to say that algorithms favour short and simple messages. Ultimately, these systems respond to what we train them to prioritise. Giving more nuanced arguments a chance on social media not only strengthens our attention spans but also helps reclaim this space for the complexity that political debates require.

4. Stop treating success as suspicious: The centre-left and pro-democracy bubble can sometimes be remarkably harsh towards its own advocates, questioning their motives as soon as they gain visibility. Instead of criticising reach and visibility, we should welcome every bit of momentum to strengthen democracy.

5. Remember that democracy exists beyond the internet: The opportunities which social media offer for civic education and democratic mobilisation are enormous – especially if we finally accept that there is no such thing as a "real world" separate from an "online world". The internet is an integral part of our everyday lives. Ideas and movements can only reach their full potential when they resonate everywhere. That means we need to engage in debates and build our networks in both spaces. Not to replace one with the other, but to strengthen and enrich each of them.

→ Merle Strunk is an education and knowledge transfer officer at the BKHS.

→ Alisa Rieth is a knowledge transfer officer for Peace and Security at the BKHS.

What should guide decision-making when principles and political realities point in different directions?



"Principles are not an add-on to political reality but part of the world we live in, expressing what is truthful and enduring. At the same time, they cannot be separated from the conditions of their implementation. Decision-making should therefore be guided by principles, even when they cannot ever be fully realised. They remain an ideal to strive towards, requiring us to accept failure, learn from it and try once again."

Lisa Neal is a journalist, lecturer and conflict researcher on the gendered impacts of targeted sanctions at the University of Hamburg.

Democracies are under pressure worldwide. Today, nearly three-quarters of the global population live under autocratic rule. While authoritarian regimes are gaining influence, liberal democracies are becoming less resilient in many parts of the world. Faced with comparable challenges, former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt grappled with a question that remains strikingly relevant today: How should democratic states engage with autocratic regimes whose political systems fundamentally contradict their own values?

Engage with autocrats or push back?

FINDINGS FROM THE HELMUT SCHMIDT-ARCHIV

TEXT: FRANZISKA ZOLLWEG

Schmidt's approach to the dilemma of how to engage with autocratic regimes can be traced through the collections of letters, records of conversation and foreign policy papers preserved in the Helmut Schmidt-Archiv (HSA), the private archive of the politician, publicist and elder statesman. These holdings provide unique insights into the inner workings of international politics and offer an invaluable perspective on Schmidt's own political decision-making. The documents give a glimpse into his personal assessments, emotional responses and dealings with the Eastern European autocrats of his time. Taken together,

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BUNDESREPUBLIK DEUTSCHLAND
DER BUNDESKANZLER

Bonn, den Mai 1978

Sehr geehrter Herr Präsident,

ich habe Staatsminister Wischnewski mit einer für mein Land außerordentlich wichtigen vertraulichen Mission beauftragt.

Die Bundesregierung hat den zuständigen Behörden der Sozialistischen Föderativen Republik Jugoslawiens ein Ersuchen übermittelt, in dem unter Bezugnahme auf die einschlägigen Bedingungen des deutsch-jugoslawischen Auslieferungsvertrages vom 26.11.1970 um Auslieferung von Clemens Wagner, Brigitte Mohnhaupt, Peter Boock und Sieglinde Hoffmann gebeten wird. Ich möchte nicht verfehlen, Sie, Herr Präsident, darauf hinzuweisen, daß es sich bei diesen Personen um einige der meistgesuchten und gefährlichsten Terroristen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland handelt, denen schwerste Straftaten einschließlich des Mordes vorgeworfen werden. Diese Taten, nämlich u. a. die Entführung und Ermordung von Hanns Martin Schleyer sowie der Mord an ~~Buback~~ Jürgen Ponto, haben nicht nur in der Bundesrepublik, sondern in der ganzen Welt Aufsehen und Abscheu erregt; sie haben eine außerordentliche Bedeutung für die gesamte öffentliche Meinung

Seiner Exzellenz
dem Präsidenten der Sozialistischen
Föderativen Republik Jugoslawien
Herrn Josip Broz Tito

Belgrad

- 2 -

READ HELMUT SCHMIDT'S FULL LETTER TO PRESIDENT JOSIP BROZ TITO HERE →

they reveal a recurring tension at the heart of Schmidt's foreign policy: dialogue was essential for building trust and preserving space for political action, but it had clear limits when it came into conflict with legal principles, humanitarian concerns and strategic interests. The archive, therefore, is more than a record of past diplomacy. It allows us to examine what engagement with autocratic regimes could – and could not – achieve.

Building trust through dialogue

No relationship illustrates the potential of dialogue more clearly than Schmidt's dealings with Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and Chairman of the State Council of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Despite political differences between the two men and an increasingly tense international climate, Schmidt sought to normalise relations between the two German states.

One extraordinary record of these efforts is provided by a letter dated 5 October 1980, which Schmidt wrote to Honecker on the day of the Bundestag election. Sending the letter was one of his first official acts following his confirmation as Chancellor, lending it considerable symbolic significance. In effect, it reopened direct dialogue between the two leading politicians after a six-year hiatus. Schmidt wrote that he considered it important to hold an exchange of views on the future development of relations between the two German states. At the same time, the letter was his final attempt to arrange a personal meeting between the two statesmen. On two previous occasions, planned visits had been cancelled because of international crises.

Schmidt's strategy of dialogue as an instrument of responsible foreign policy ultimately proved successful. With the clear objective of building trust, Schmidt travelled to the socialist German state on 11 December 1981 for his first official working visit as Chancellor. This laid the basis for further trade agreements and, not least, helped advance the negotiated release of 34,000 political prisoners from the GDR (Wölbern, 2008). The encounter thus illustrates what sustained engagement could accomplish: it did not resolve the fundamental ideological conflict between the two German states, but it created political space for practical agreements and humanitarian progress.

When dialogue reaches its limits

If Schmidt's relationship with Honecker demonstrates the possibilities of engagement, his dealings with Yugoslavia's President Josip Broz Tito reveal its limits. Here, too, Schmidt regarded dialogue as an indispensable instrument of responsible diplomacy. In 1974, relations between Bonn and Belgrade had stalled for the first time since 1968 after Schmidt mentioned Ostpolitik only briefly in his first government statement. In response, Tito postponed his planned visit, having doubts about the new Federal Government's foreign policy direction. Yet the initial tensions did not prevent the two leaders from establishing a working relationship. When Tito visited the new government in Bonn in June 1974, Schmidt used the opportunity to emphasise his preference for direct and trust-based communication.

Four years later, however, the limits of personal relationship with an authoritarian leader became apparent. In May 1978, Schmidt sent an urgent letter to Tito. Following the arrest in Zagreb of four *Rote Armee Fraktion* (Red Army Faction, RAF) members, the Federal Government sought their extradition. In his letter, Schmidt stressed that these individuals were among the

Federal Republic's most wanted terrorists and were accused of involvement in the kidnapping and murder of the employers' association president Hanns Martin Schleyer. In return, the Yugoslav leadership demanded the handover of eight Croatian exiles whom it regarded as terrorists. The Federal Government rejected this proposal, citing its commitment to the rule of law. The Belgrade District Court subsequently refused extradition and ordered the release of the imprisoned RAF members.

The case placed considerable strain on relations between Bonn and Belgrade and resulted in a series of diplomatic sanctions. Planned visits were suspended and rhetoric towards the Yugoslav government became more confrontational. Nevertheless, broader foreign policy considerations prevented Schmidt from allowing the dispute to escalate. The NATO member states were determined to ensure that Yugoslavia remained a non-aligned country after Tito's death. Consequently, they sought to avoid any course of action that might push Yugoslavia back into the Soviet sphere of influence.

The affair illustrates the limits of a policy based on dialogue. Personal trust could reduce tensions and keep channels of communication open, but it could not overcome fundamental conflicts of interest, differing understandings of law and statehood or, in this instance, the strategic priorities of allies.

The Helmut Schmidt-Archiv as a repository of diplomatic experience

Archives are far more than repositories of historical memory. They preserve knowledge and experience, create transparency and enable societies to learn from past crises. Particularly in times of international tension, they reveal how political decisions were made in the past and which strategies proved effective – or ineffective. The diverse holdings of the HSA document the extraordinary complexity of foreign policy during the 1970s and 1980s. They reveal uncertainty and conflict, while at the same time making Helmut Schmidt's political decisions more comprehensible. They preserve the language and tactics of diplomacy and show us how relationships with Eastern European autocracies evolved over time.

Anyone seeking to navigate today's international crises will not find simple recipes within archives, but they will discover invaluable experience. As geopolitical tensions are on the rise once more, the archival record reminds us that successful diplomacy requires maintaining channels of dialogue without falling into naivety. True diplomatic wisdom lies in mastering both sides of the balance: leveraging engagement to build practical trust where possible while clearly defining its limits and fiercely defending democratic values when fundamental interests collide.

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→ Franziska Zollweg is academic head of the Correspondence Project at the Helmut Schmidt-Archiv.

THE HELMUT SCHMIDT-ARCHIV INVITES RESEARCHERS, POLITICIANS AND DIPLOMATS TO ENGAGE WITH THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE OF HELMUT SCHMIDT AND HIS LEGACY. COME VISIT US IN HAMBURG →



BEYOND ENTER-TAINMENT

Games as tools of political education

In an era of power politics, games offer something traditional educational lectures cannot: the lived experience of making difficult choices under uncertainty. Well-designed games force players to act without perfect information, weigh competing values and live with the consequences of their choices. They are underrated, high-impact tools for developing the strategic skills and ethical judgement liberal democracies urgently need.

TEXT: PIA DIETZ

Imagine you are the president of a democratic country. Two players sit opposite you. One of them is secretly trying to dismantle your democracy. You have no evidence, only intuition. If you accuse the wrong person, your own team loses trust. If you trust the wrong one, democracy may collapse. This is not a seminar on political theory. It is the opening round of the popular card game *Secret Hitler*. The game illustrates what makes games politically valuable: They place players in situations where uncertainty, competing interests and difficult decisions are not abstract concepts but immediate problems they have to navigate.

Games accomplish something traditional political education often struggles to achieve: they make the player a protagonist rather than a spectator. As psychologist James Paul Gee argues, good games create well-ordered problems that require systematic thinking, hypothesis testing and active adaptation to feedback (Gee, 2003). Instead of simply learning *about* political dilemmas, players experience the pressure of making decisions within them. Board and digital games have long demonstrated this potential.

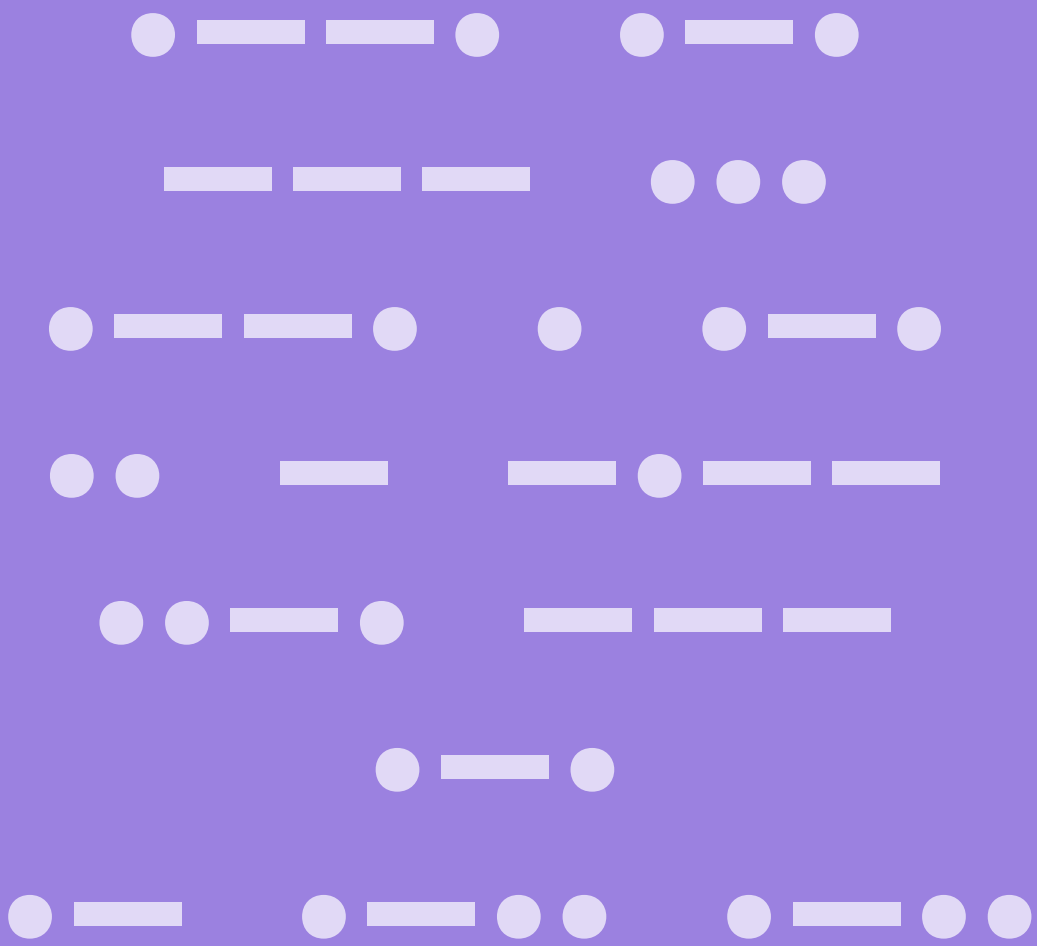
Political education institutions from schools to think tanks should systematically integrate curated game formats into their programmes with clearly defined debriefing protocols. Furthermore, game designers and political educators should collaborate more closely to translate complex twenty-first-century challenges – from geoeconomic competition and hybrid threats to information warfare and the governance of emerging technologies – into meaningful, playable scenarios.

If our central challenge is to defend the normative foundations of liberal democracy while recalibrating economic and security policy, games offer a laboratory to explore these choices without the high stakes of real-world failure. They do not tell us what to think; they create the conditions under which we must think. They do not prescribe solutions, but they present dilemmas. In a world that demands both strategic competence and moral clarity, that practice may be more valuable than we assume.

A prime example is *Unlock Europe*, a free escape game developed by the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung (BKHS) and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH). Designed for young people aged fifteen and older, the scenario is urgent: An EU summit spirals into crisis, delegates are stuck in a lift and participants must step in to negotiate the final declaration.

Below are three mini-puzzles adapted directly from the *Unlock Europe* experience that test your strategic thinking, insight into environmental policy and media literacy. Ready for the challenge? Let's play!

PUZZLE 1
Economic security morse code



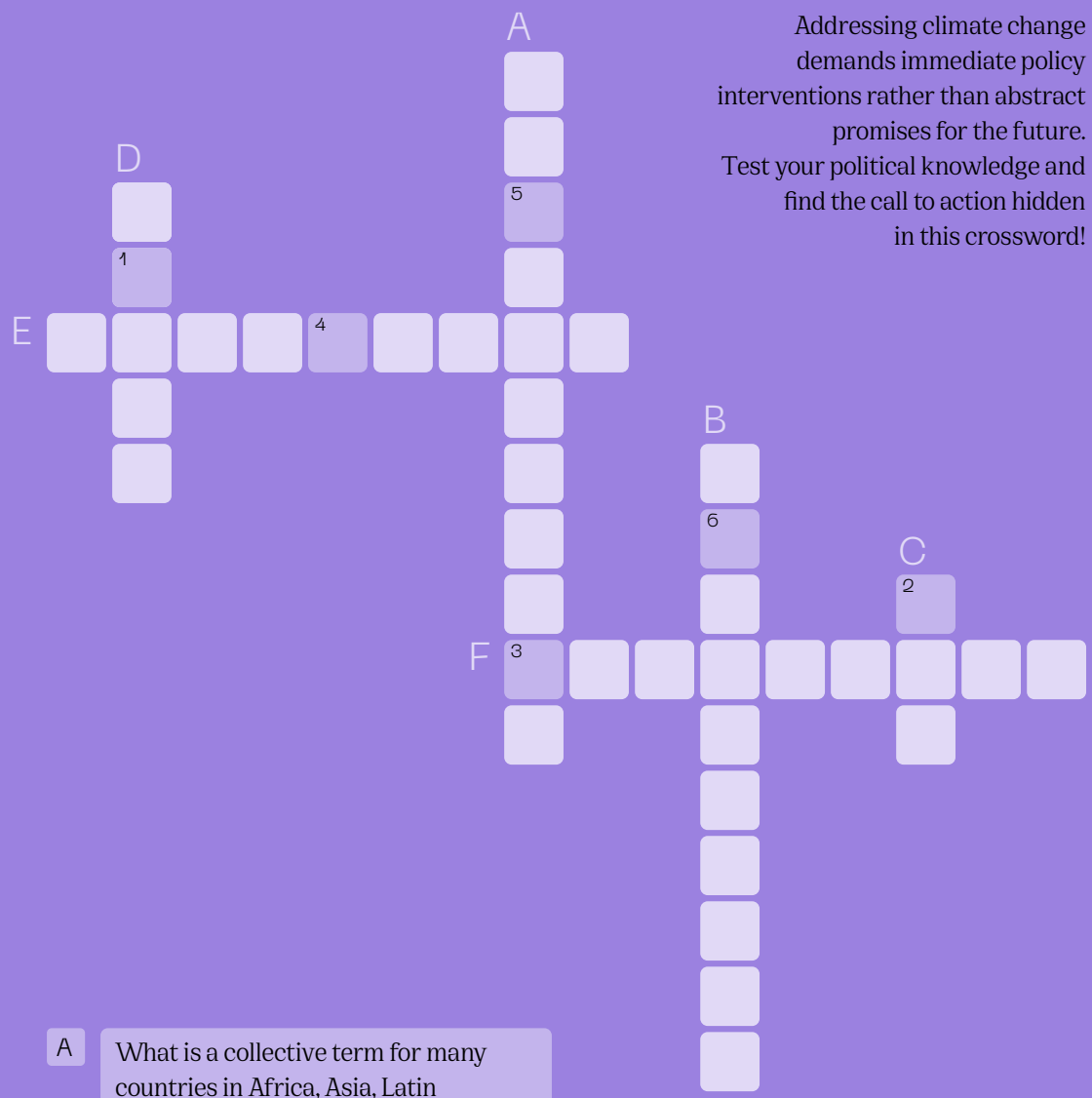
Balancing supply chain resilience, trade dependencies and economic inequality is essential for maintaining democratic stability under strategic pressure. Decipher the Morse code to reveal the foundational goal of equitable global trade!

← LET'S PLAY TOGETHER! BOOK OUR ESCAPE GAME *UNLOCK EUROPE* FOR YOUR SCHOOL CLASS, UNIVERSITY SEMINAR, YOUTH ORGANISATION OR WORKPLACE TEAM (AVAILABLE IN GERMAN AND ENGLISH)

PUZZLE 2
International climate policy crossword

1 2 3 4 5 6

Addressing climate change demands immediate policy interventions rather than abstract promises for the future. Test your political knowledge and find the call to action hidden in this crossword!



A What is a collective term for many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin and South America?

B What was the number of the 2024 climate conference in Baku?

C What is the abbreviation for the UN climate conference?

D Where did the 2015 climate conference take place?

E What is one popular concept for the climate policy of the EU?

F Which sector causes the third most CO2 emissions in Germany?

PUZZLE 3
The mirror text challenge on digital literacy

Combating disinformation requires critical media literacy to resist foreign influence and prevent societal polarisation. Look closely to uncover the shared value that keeps democratic societies resilient!



Solutions:
Puzzle 1: Prosperity for all
Puzzle 2: Act now
Puzzle 3: United we stand

→ Pia Dietz supports youth and democracy education projects such as the escape game *Unlock Europe* at the BKHS.

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What should guide decision-making when principles and political realities point in different directions?

"When ethical principles and political realities point in different directions, political judgment must remain anchored in human dignity, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. Especially in the grey zones of hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns, these principles are not only action-guiding but also identity-defining for liberal democracies. Political prudence determines how these principles are translated into practice under difficult circumstances — but never whether they remain valid."



Veronika Bock is the deputy director of the Institute for Peace and Military Ethics (IFME) in Hamburg.



POWER, PRINCIPLES AND THE CASE FOR HONEST DOUBLE STANDARDS

Europe's credibility problem is not that it sometimes puts interests before principles. Every major power does. The problem is its reluctance to admit when it does so. A more honest European foreign policy would distinguish between necessary exceptions, potentially defensible double standards and genuine hypocrisy – and accept the political cost of each.

TEXT: GORAN BULDIOSKI

Across much of the world, Europe's claim that it is defending a rules-based international order is increasingly met with scepticism. Whether this perception is entirely fair is beside the point. For many outside the West, repeated European appeals to democracy, human rights and international law sound less like universal principles than selective arguments deployed when politically convenient.

Europeans often see themselves differently. Many sincerely believe that, in an era of growing authoritarianism, the EU remains one of the last defenders of liberal democracy and the rules-based international order. Yet credibility cannot be asserted;

"Europe's credibility is shaped not only by its intentions but also by how others experience its actions."

it must be earned and repeatedly renewed. If European countries are increasingly perceived as selectively applying international law – from Iraq and Afghanistan to Gaza and Ukraine, from migration to vaccine distribution – that perception itself weakens their influence.

The problem, however, is not simply hypocrisy. It is more complicated than that. Foreign policy inevitably produces inconsistencies. The question is not whether they can always be avoided, but whether governments accept responsibility for them.

The price of claiming principles

Hypocrisy should be reserved for those who knowingly proclaim principles they never intend to follow. Donald Trump and many authoritarian or populist leaders rarely pretend to be constrained by universal rules. Their politics are openly transactional, interest-driven and often proudly inconsistent. Violence, too, frequently plays a part. Partners and adversaries alike understand that alliances are temporary and principles negotiable. Hypocrisy is therefore not an unfortunate by-product of their politics but part of the political bargain they offer.

Pro-democracy politicians make a different claim: that their power is constrained by rules. Unlike their authoritarian counterparts, many of them genuinely aspire to uphold liberal values while simultaneously protecting national security, economic interests, historical responsibilities and domestic political stability. The challenge is that these objectives frequently collide. Foreign policy is not an exercise in moral purity but in managing competing obligations. Their inconsistency therefore carries a greater credibility cost.

Not all departures are equal

Not every departure from a stated principle is the same. Trade-offs arise when values conflict. They can be classified into three groups: exceptions, double standards and genuine hypocrisy.

Exceptions suspend ordinary rules for stated reasons. Finland's response to Russia's instrumentalisation of migration illustrates this well. In 2024, Finland adopted emergency legislation allowing temporary restrictions on access to asylum procedures after Russia

was widely accused of deliberately directing asylum seekers towards the Finnish border as part of a hybrid destabilisation campaign. Many legal experts argued that the legislation sat uneasily with the Refugee Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights and EU asylum law. The Finnish government acknowledged that the measure departed from ordinary asylum procedures while maintaining that an exceptional threat to sovereignty and national security justified the restriction. Whether the legislation ultimately withstands legal scrutiny remains open. Crucially, rather than claiming that security and refugee protection were perfectly aligned, Finland openly acknowledged that one value had temporarily taken precedence over another.

Double standards occur when comparable cases are judged differently because of identity, alliance or interest. They involve both perceived and actual double standards. The boundary between justified differentiation and double standards is often contested. Germany's approach to Israel and Gaza demonstrates how difficult balancing values and interests can become. Germany rightly insists that international law must underpin Europe's response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Yet when assessing the conduct of the Israeli military in Gaza, successive German governments have appeared considerably more cautious, often emphasising historical responsibility and broader political considerations alongside or instead of legal arguments. Many governments in the Global South perceive this as a double standard, some even as hypocrisy. Whether that judgement is entirely justified matters less than recognising its consequences. Europe's credibility is shaped not only by its intentions but also by how others experience its actions.

The EU's different treatment of displaced Ukrainians and asylum seekers arriving through the Mediterranean illustrates the contested boundary between justified differentiation and double standards. Temporary protection for Ukrainians demonstrated how rapidly Europe could act when political solidarity existed. Many outside Europe contrasted this with its more restrictive treatment of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Africa. There are legally and practically relevant differences between these groups, making simple comparisons misleading. Precisely because people can reasonably disagree about whether those differences justify different treatment, European governments should explain their reasoning rather than present it as self-evident applications of universal principles.

Hypocrisy arises when political selectivity is disguised as principled consistency. This occurs when leaders invoke universal principles only when they serve immediate political interests while abandoning them without explanation whenever they become inconvenient. This is fundamentally different from acknowledging difficult trade-offs or recognising exceptional circumstances. The EU's response to the Trump administration's trade policy illustrates this tension: European leaders vehemently denounced unilateral US steel tariffs as an illegal breach of World Trade Organisation rules, presenting themselves as defenders of open, rules-based trade. Yet, when implementing its own Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) or delaying the Mercosur trade agreement, the EU imposed stringent climate and environmental requirements that effectively serve as trade barriers against developing economies like Brazil, India and South Africa. Rather than admitting that domestic protectionism and industrial interests influenced these decisions, Brussels framed its measures strictly as universal environmental obligations — demanding compliance from partners while deflecting accusations of green protectionism.

Stop promising consistency

The EU's credibility problem does not stem from the fact that it sometimes applies double standards. Every major power does. It is that the EU and its member states continue to deny them even when they are obvious to everyone else. Public opinion reflects this better than many politicians acknowledge. A poll conducted by Datapraxis in Germany

found that only 12 per cent of the population supported a purely interest-driven foreign policy, while just 10 per cent believed values should always take precedence. Nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) preferred balancing interests and values (Datapraxis, 2022). Citizens intuitively understand what political leaders often resist admitting: foreign policy inevitably involves trade-offs. Pro-democracy European leaders should therefore stop promising consistency. Consistency should remain the default aspiration of European foreign policy. Yet departures from it are sometimes inevitable. Rather than denying them, governments should ask four questions: Is the exception publicly stated? Is it necessary and proportionate? Is it temporary and reviewable? Are they willing to accept legal scrutiny and political costs? Honest answers will not eliminate double standards, but they distinguish legitimate exceptions from convenient expediency.

The EU will ultimately be judged not by whether it always chose principles over competing interests. It will be judged by whether it was honest about the moments when it could not.

→ Goran Buldioski is a senior fellow at the Hertie School exploring European democracy, societal resilience, defence and preparedness.

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What should guide decision-making when principles and political realities point in different directions?



"Though often presented as inevitabilities, we shape political realities. They can and should change without questioning our historically rooted moral commitments. An intersectional feminist lens offers both: an analytical tool to understand realities of crises holistically, and an emancipatory force for change aligned with our principles. Together, these two pillars enable reflective and power-critical decision-making while seeking inclusive and peaceful alternatives."

Mariana Lechterbeck is co-president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Germany (WILPF Germany).

OPEN BY DESIGN, VULNERABLE BY NATURE?

Democracies, hybrid threats and collective resilience in the Arctic



Liberal democracies are open by design, but they need not be vulnerable by nature. Hybrid threats become particularly effective where hostile actors can turn openness, interdependence and institutional fragmentation into strategic leverage. While Arctic states increasingly recognise the same spectrum of below-threshold threats, divergent perceptions of vulnerability continue to produce fragmented responses. Effective resilience therefore depends less on further national securitisation than on a shared understanding of vulnerabilities, responsibilities and the seams between systems.

TEXT: FIONA KRAMER

Hybrid threats are a major security challenge, yet the concept remains contested. This essay relies on the Hybrid Centre of Excellence's definition: coordinated action targeting the systemic vulnerabilities of democratic states and institutions through a range of means, often operating below the thresholds of detection. Such campaigns combine political, economic, military, civilian and digital instruments below the threshold of armed conflict and use ambiguity to influence decision-making (Giannopoulos, Smith & Theocharidou, 2021). Commonly used instruments include cyberattacks, disinformation, economic coercion, infrastructure sabotage and covert political influence.

The danger for liberal democracies lies in the characteristics essential to open societies. Open information environments can be manipulated, interconnected markets can create dependencies, democratic institutions provide channels for influence and decentralised governance creates multiple decision-making points. Hostile actors can therefore operate inside the openness of a democratic system rather than confronting it directly; for instance, they can exploit uncertainty, political disagreement and institutional fragmentation to complicate democratic decision-making. Liberal democracies cannot simply close the access points that create vulnerability without damaging the freedoms they seek to protect. Thus, the challenge is not openness itself but defending an open system without undermining it.

Ambiguity: hybrid threats exploit disagreements

A defining feature of hybrid threats is their reliance on ambiguity: Activities are deliberately designed to complicate attribution, obscure intent and blur the identity of the perpetrator. Political leaders therefore struggle to decide whether and how to respond. What one government treats as hostile interference, another may see as criminal activity, commercial competition or an intelligence matter. In this way, hybrid threats exploit political disagreement over attribution as much as material vulnerabilities.

In the case of the Arctic, there is still disagreement over how to handle hybrid threats. Years of repeating the mantra "High North, low tension" have delayed appropriate responses and arguably skewed policymakers' priorities towards an excessively high tolerance for malign activity. Ironically, the desire to keep the Arctic peaceful may incentivise actors such as Russia and China to act (Conley & Wall, 2021).

In addition, Arctic defence and security architectures, which largely focus on hard-security interests at national, regional

and multilateral levels, reinforce this problem. Because the system often fails to capture transnational, local and societal challenges, ambiguity over jurisdiction and responsibility leaves gaps that hostile actors can exploit. Overlapping forms of sovereignty can also produce grey zones in which existing maritime law and political norms may be challenged (Sørensen et al., 2021).

Vulnerabilities of the Arctic

The Arctic combines physical, societal and institutional characteristics that can amplify hybrid interference. Vast distances and sparse infrastructure mean that relatively small disruptions can have disproportionate consequences. Subsea cables, telecommunications, satellite services, navigation systems and ports connect remote communities and national economies to wider networks. Disruption in one location can consequently affect communication, mobility, economic activity or security across borders.

Arctic vulnerability is also societal and political. Remote communities may face socioeconomic inequalities, limited connectivity and difficult relationships with central governments. In several Arctic states, mistrust rooted in colonial injustices can be exploited in the digital and information domains, which links hybrid threats to broader themes of sovereignty, social cohesion and political trust.

Most importantly, Arctic vulnerabilities are asymmetric. Geography, socioeconomic conditions, political culture and states' historical relationships with Russia shape how they perceive and prioritise threats. For instance, Canada integrates human security into its Arctic security outlook, while the US ranks hard security concerns first. These differences are not necessarily weaknesses, as national resilience must reflect national circumstances (Kertysova & Gricius, 2023). However, when threats cross borders or institutional boundaries, differences in assessment, attribution, legal jurisdiction, responsibility and willingness to respond create exploitable seams between national systems. Vulnerabilities therefore lie not only *within* individual states, but also *between* them.

From national to collective resilience

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to hybrid threats. Existing approaches in the Arctic rightly emphasise strengthening national resilience, improving situational awareness and identifying domestic vulnerabilities through whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches. These measures remain essential, but they are insufficient against threats that deliberately cross national, institutional and sectoral boundaries. Stronger national resilience does not automatically translate into collective resilience. Collective resilience must instead address the seams between national systems.

First, collective resilience requires a shared understanding of vulnerabilities. States need to understand not only their own weaknesses, but also how vulnerabilities interact across borders and sectors. Joint risk and vulnerability assessments can connect physical, digital, societal and institutional risks and identify where disruption in one system may generate consequences in another. This also requires breaking down silos between defence and civilian agencies, different levels of government and private actors and local communities. The objective is not to produce identical national priorities, but to develop a common picture of where differences between systems create opportunities for exploitation.

Second, collective resilience requires shared situational awareness. Understanding vulnerabilities must be accompanied by the ability to identify hybrid activity as it emerges. Cross-border information and intelligence sharing can reveal patterns that may remain invisible from a purely national perspective and improve early detection, attribution and preparedness. In an interconnected region such as the Arctic, situational awareness must therefore extend beyond national borders and include relevant governmental, security, private and local actors.

Third, collective resilience requires shared thresholds and clearer responsibilities. Awareness alone does not guarantee action. States need greater clarity over who assesses an incident, which institution has the

"Liberal democracies cannot simply close the access points that create vulnerability without damaging the freedoms they seek to protect. Thus, the challenge is not openness itself but defending an open system without undermining it."

authority to respond, when partners should be informed and what level of evidence is sufficient to trigger coordinated measures. Greater convergence around response thresholds and procedures can reduce the risk that political disagreement or institutional uncertainty leads to inaction.

Collective resilience therefore does not require a single Arctic security policy or the elimination of national approaches. Rather, it means connecting them so that differences between national systems do not become exploitable gaps. The goal is to make the interfaces between states and institutions more resilient while preserving the openness, interdependence and cooperation that are essential to Arctic governance. On the bright side: Just as hybrid threats can generate cascading effects across sectors, resilience measures in one domain can strengthen others.

→ Fiona Kramer is a trainee in the Maritime Unit of the European Defence Agency and former BKHS student assistant.

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10 YEARS CIVIL FLEET

VISUALISING THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS GRODOTZKI



As the liberal international order comes under increasing strain, Western democracies are confronted with new forms of authoritarianism and growing militarisation. Practices once largely confined to peripheral regions and external conflict zones - where mechanisms of governance were primarily geared towards security containment and resource management - are increasingly reframing Europe's domestic and regional security policy. In fact, the militarisation of societies and ideological politics have been recurring phenomena throughout European history. Today, this dynamic is once again manifesting itself in Europe's increasingly restrictive migration and border policies. And the Mediterranean Sea lies at the centre of this transformation.

Advanced technologies of surveillance, extraterritorial detention frameworks and militarised border controls are reshaping how Western states "manage" human mobility. Under the banner of combating irregular migration, human trafficking and security threats, the European border landscape has gradually shifted away from a relatively humanitarian approach to "border management" towards withdrawal from search and rescue (SAR) operations, the externalisation of border



After an intervention by the Libyan Coast Guard into an ongoing Sea-Watch rescue operation, a large group of refugees, who jumped in panic from their rubber boat, are clinging to a floating rescue device. Five people went missing in the resulting chaos. The rest were able to be saved by the rescue crews after the Libyan vessel retreated.

enforcement to third countries and the establishment of high-security containment facilities on European soil.

Civil society initiatives have responded to this development by reimagining SAR as "Solidarity and Resistance". Since 2016, a whole fleet of rescue ships and search planes, as well as the emergency hotline "Alarm Phone", have replaced state actors in the central Mediterranean Sea. Beyond providing life-saving assistance to migrants in distress and documenting human rights violations, these initiatives have created a vital space for solidarity and public debate on European migration policy.

The following pictures are part of the photo exhibition "10 Years Civil Fleet" by journalist, photographer and political activist Chris Grodotzki. His photographs provide a raw and necessary look at the joint struggle of refugees and activists to uphold proclaimed European values. Presenting a visual chronicle of one decade of civil sea rescue in the Mediterranean Sea, this picture series serves as a reminder that democracy is not merely a bureaucratic process to be defended in elections and parliamentary debates - but a lived reality that stubbornly includes those who are targeted by exclusionary policies.

People on the move evacuate a small child from the centre of their rubber boat and hand them over to a Sea-Watch rescue crew member, on an early August morning. Their overcrowded and unseaworthy rubber boat carried 60 men and women as well as 9 children and 28 unaccompanied minors.





Women dance and sing with their children in the recovery area of a rescue ship, right after they were transferred from their rubber boat. During the pandemic, COVID-19 posed an additional threat to both refugees and activists, but after a short forced break, rescue operations continued. Crews and survivors respectfully adhered to mask, distancing and quarantine requirements as much as they could in the confined space of the ship.







Refugees pull each other on board an Italian Coast Guard vessel off Palermo. Italian authorities had denied the massively overcrowded civil rescue ship *Open Arms* entry to the port for several days. Over 100 people eventually took their fate into their own hands and tried to swim to the coast.



The rescue ship *Sea-Watch 3* shelters 32 survivors off the coast of Malta since none of the relevant authorities assigned a safe harbour to the ship for 19 days. Those 19 days tested everyone on board both physically and psychologically. But they were also 19 days in which a former offshore supply ship became a microcosm of what Europe could and should stand for: a place of solidarity, respect and peaceful togetherness – even when the rest of the world behaves in a hostile manner.



READ THE BOOK
KEIN LAND IN SICHT
BY CHRIS GRODOTZKI –
HIS WRITTEN ACCOUNT
OF TEN YEARS OF CIVIL
SEA RESCUE IN THE
MEDITERRANEAN SEA ↓

On Christmas Eve, 7-year-old Zizo presents a drawing of his rescue by the *Sea-Watch 3*. He and his mother had previously fled from his violent father in Libya and ended up with 30 other refugees on the high seas, in a rubber boat with a broken engine. European governments would deny the survivors a port of safety for 19 straight days.





Modern cities can be planned better: more female-friendly, more environmentally conscious, more liveable. In Vienna, Eva Kail, a pioneer of feminist urban planning, has shown how the design of public space shapes who feels safe and welcome. Good planning is often barely noticeable — but it is precisely the small details that make a city more resilient, more equal and more human.

Resilience has a gender: rethinking strategic power in an age of geoeconomics

Economic security is never gender-neutral. The same power structures that sideline women's labour and undervalue the care economy also undermine a state's ability to withstand geopolitical shocks and supply chain disruptions. In an era where trade, technology and industrial policy are routinely weaponised, true national strength cannot be measured solely by defence budgets and steel output. Treating gender equality as a core strategic asset strengthens the social stability on which lasting geoeconomic resilience ultimately depends.

TEXT: LEA HOLST

Geoeconomics – understood as the strategic use of economic instruments to project state power – is never gender-neutral. Today's global economic order is shaped by fierce geopolitical competition, where major powers like the US and China leverage asymmetric market dominance, critical raw materials and trade controls to dictate terms to others. Yet this strategic arena also perpetuates a deep-seated bias: the historical dominance of national security policy by a select, predominantly male elite. As of 2026, UN Women estimates that gender equality in the highest political positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years (UN Women, 2026).

Simultaneously, traditional security frameworks continue to subordinate human security to hard national power, even though feminist scholars have long exposed how this narrow focus masks the very vulnerabilities it claims to eliminate (see, for instance, Cohn, 1987 and Tickner, 2001). The current debate on economic security within Germany and the EU proves that this oversight is now compromising the efficacy of economic statecraft. If the EU's goal is to honour its democratic values while achieving genuine strategic autonomy, it must confront not only global rivalries but also the internal inequalities that weaken its economic foundations.

Geoeconomics as a gendered system

Geoeconomics is not merely about statecraft; it is a structural system that continues to distribute risk and capital unevenly. Modern economic statecraft relies heavily on economic leverage such as sanctions, export controls, tariff threats and supply chain reshoring. Yet the structural architecture of global trade depends on invisible unpaid care work and undervalued labour, overwhelmingly performed by women.

When major economies pivot towards industrial policies including state subsidies funnelled into heavy manufacturing, microchips and defence technology, they often reinforce long-existing gendered economic hierarchies.

These strategic investments disproportionately benefit capital-intensive, traditionally male-dominated sectors. Meanwhile, the essential care infrastructure that allows the labour force to function remains underfunded and treated as a fiscal burden rather than a strategic foundation.

Gender research demonstrates that domestic equality directly impacts a state's foreign policy. Caprioli (2000) shows that states where women participate more fully in the labour market are less inclined to deploy military force during international disputes. Furthermore, recent data highlights that female political leadership leads to superior crisis management, higher spending on social protections and more durable peace agreements (UN Women, 2026). Thus, addressing gender disparities offers tangible strategic advantages.

In the realm of economics, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) identifies gender equality as a vital engine for macroeconomic stability, as it mitigates demographic decline by enlarging the workforce and boosting productivity (Kolovich et al., 2024). Closing the gender gap in labour participation could unlock an additional 23 per cent of GDP across emerging and developing economies – translating to roughly 9 to 10 trillion dollars, an amount greater than the combined annual economic output of Germany and Japan. However, market liberalisation alone will not achieve this; without deliberate policy intervention, ongoing economic shifts will simply exacerbate unpaid domestic burdens and trap women in lower-paid sectors.

Crises as revealers of vulnerability

Global shocks have consistently exposed these underlying structural vulnerabilities. Research by the International Labour Organisation confirms that economic stagnation and supply chain disruptions hit vulnerable populations hardest – most notably informal, care and migrant workers who lack financial cushions (ILO, 2023). In times of crisis, state protection is typically reserved for sectors deemed "systemically important", a category shaped by traditional security and industrial interests.

During acute shocks, progress on pay equity, worker protections and childcare infrastructure is routinely sacrificed for immediate economic expediency. Heavy industry, energy and defence technology receive substantial emergency bailouts under the premise that weaponry and machinery are needed to project power. During the recent energy and cost-of-living crisis, Germany allocated a 200-billion-euro "Economic Defence Shield" (*Wirtschaftsstabilisierungsfonds*) primarily to buffer energy-intensive heavy industries and corporate giants, while fiscal support for state childcare expansion and social care services continues to face budget cuts and freezes. Yet this logic ignores a fundamental truth: supply chains, industrial output and national defence will collapse without a functioning social foundation.

The crisis in the European healthcare sector during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent inflationary shocks illustrates this contradiction. Healthcare and service personnel, over 70 per cent of whom are women, were celebrated as critical to national survival. They were most exposed to risks even while they were the ones keeping society operational. Yet, they continue to face chronically low wages and poor working conditions in countries like Germany. This gap between what a state recognises as essential during a crisis and what it values during peacetime is a severe strategic liability.



Societies that allow their social infrastructure to erode are undermining the very baseline resilience required to weather future geopolitical shocks.

Equality as a strategic imperative

Navigating an era of geoeconomic confrontation requires a normative shift. Gender equality must be understood not as a moral bonus attached to sound economic policy but as its structural prerequisite. Domestic social cohesion is a core strategic capability that generates a measurable "resilience dividend" because public investments in social stability, care work and gender equality generate a long-term return: a more adaptable workforce and a cohesive society that can absorb external geopolitical shocks without collapsing (Winter & Holst, 2026).

In practical terms, the pursuit of greater equality and social cohesion as part of an "inclusive geoeconomics" strategy means keeping economies open and diversifying supply chains rather than retreating into reactionary protectionism. It requires directing public investment into health, education and care infrastructure with the same strategic priority currently given to semiconductors and steel. Finally, it demands making invisible labour visible in national budgets and trade negotiations through gender-responsive budgeting. If economic security truly begins at home, the EU's strategic commitments must extend inward to empower its workforce just as rigorously as they extend outward to confront global rivals.

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LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR APPROACH ON "INCLUSIVE GEOECONOMICS", READ OUR BKHS REPORT "ECONOMIC SECURITY STARTS AT HOME: INTRODUCING AN INCLUSIVE GEOECONOMICS STRATEGY FOR GERMANY" NOW →

What should guide decision-making when principles and political realities point in different directions?

"It is in times of crisis that our principles are tested. If we abandon them, what are we even defending? Goals that might seem idealistic, such as gender equality and climate justice, are key to sustaining peaceful and democratic societies. Safeguarding them is a practical choice. We should use these principles as tools to end cycles of war and conflict and to imagine new ways of building peace."



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Helmut Schmidt governed during times of global crisis. But he also faced major domestic challenges that repeatedly forced him to set political priorities under immense time pressure. The following five exemplary conflicts illustrate major challenges that Schmidt was confronted with. Following one's own moral compass in the face of multiple crises was an extreme challenge. Schmidt always sought to defend the principles of a democratic state governed by the rule of law. How best to achieve this involved both complex political and personal decisions – and was therefore always highly controversial.

Helmut Schmidt navigating power and principles in five conflicts

TEXT: MAGNUS KOCH & ALEXANDER TYSSEN

1.
State power vs civil liberties: testing the limits of the rule of law in 1977



The terrorism of of four *Rote Armee Fraktion* (Red Army Faction, RAF) members challenged contemporaries in a unique way. A small group of left-wing terrorists declared war on liberal democracy: Through attacks, kidnappings and murders, they sought to force the state to adopt authoritarian measures and thus reveal the supposedly true nature of its form of government – which the RAF viewed as a barely disguised fascist regime. The kidnapping of Hanns Martin Schleyer, president of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, in September 1977 marked the climax of events that led the government under Helmut Schmidt to feel compelled to enact restrictions on various constitutional rights. Several examples included the so-called "Contact Ban Law", which interfered with the relationship between incarcerated terrorists and their defence attorneys, and the "computerised search" ("*Rasterfahndung*") for terrorist offenders, a practice that was problematic for data protection because even uninvolved individuals could be spied upon.

When the terrorists demanded the release of imprisoned fellow RAF combatants in exchange for the kidnapped Schleyer, Schmidt decided – in broad agreement with his crisis teams – that the state must not allow itself to be blackmailed by a terrorist organisation. This conviction was pitted against his responsibility for Schleyer's life. The need to weigh competing constitutional duties to protect life presented Schmidt with one of the greatest challenges of his tenure: balancing the risk to future lives from potential RAF attacks, should the terrorists be released, against the immediate life of Hanns Martin Schleyer. The assassination of Schleyer in October 1977 weighed heavily on Schmidt's conscience.

2.
Energy security vs public protest: Schmidt's nuclear policy



Helmut Schmidt's energy policy was shaped by the oil crises of 1973 and 1979. In 1974, oil prices and unemployment rose sharply. Reducing dependence on oil-producing countries therefore became a top priority for Schmidt. His government relied on domestic coal and the expansion of nuclear power to ensure energy security through diversification. For example, the Federal Government planned to accelerate the construction of nuclear power plants to increase their share of electricity production to 45 per cent by 1985. Starting in the mid-1970s, however, opposition to nuclear power began to grow among ever larger parts of the population. The protests were driven by concerns about environmental risks, the unresolved issue of nuclear waste disposal and the lack of local participation in decision-making. Tensions intensified in places such as Brokdorf and Gorleben, where construction projects were also being delayed by legal proceedings.

Overall, differing conceptions of democratic decision-making between the Federal Government led by Schmidt and the anti-nuclear movement became clear: parliamentary processes and decisions grounded in the rule of law, on the one hand, and civil disobedience as well as spontaneous, unconventional resistance, on the other. Parts of the anti-nuclear movement went on to form the Green Party in 1980. It was not until the nuclear disasters at Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011) that the Federal Republic of Germany finally phased out nuclear energy, a process that was completed in 2023.

3. National identity: is Germany a country of immigration?



In the wake of the economic downturns caused by the currency, structural and oil price crises after 1973, the Federal Government under Willy Brandt decided on a far-reaching "recruitment stop" for "guest workers" from countries outside the European Community. Moreover, efforts were to be stepped up to encourage more people to return to their home countries. Against the backdrop of yet another intensifying economic and labour market crisis, the Schmidt cabinet attempted in 1981 to prevent a further influx of workers "by exhausting all legal options". During the cabinet meeting, Interior Minister Gerhart Baum from the coalition partner FDP emphasised that Germany was "de facto a country of immigration" and needed to ensure better integration. However, Schmidt's assertion during a 1981 cabinet meeting that Germany "is not a country of immigration and does not wish to become one" became the basis for government action.

Schmidt always strove to argue in a sober and pragmatic manner. The deliberate stoking of xenophobia – as we see today from right-wing extremists – was alien to him. Rather, he often appealed for "tolerance and openness". At the same time, his restrictive stance on migration lacked empirical evidence – a sharp contrast to his usual positions which were grounded in deep expertise. While academic research generally views migration to West Germany as a success story, especially over the long term, Schmidt primarily emphasised concerns about immigration, fearing that populists could exploit public fears and thereby threaten democracy.

4.
Spheres of influence: Schmidt's assessment of the 2014 annexation of Crimea



One year before Schmidt's death in 2015, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. In an interview, he expressed understanding for the forcible seizure of the territory. To his mind, it was just as "disputed" whether Crimea was Russian territory as was whether a Ukrainian nation even existed. Historians, Schmidt maintained, would disagree on the matter. Yet, Schmidt did not consider that Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, had declared its independence in 1991, a move recognised at the time by both the Russian Federation and the rest of the international community.

Schmidt was also sceptical of NATO's expansion to include Eastern European countries, a process that had been underway since the late 1990s. He felt that Western countries had unnecessarily challenged what he considered to be the legitimate security interests of Russia. In his view, the expansion of NATO did little to promote lasting peace in Europe. A possible explanation for Schmidt's position, which was also controversial among the public, can be traced back to historical factors. His thinking was shaped by the concept of "spheres of influence" from the Cold War. For Schmidt, respecting these spheres was a central imperative – especially when it came to preventing new wars in Europe.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT HELMUT SCHMIDT AND HIS LEGACY? START PLANNING YOUR VISIT TO OUR EXHIBITION "SCHMIDT! LIVING DEMOCRACY" IN HAMBURG NOW →

5.
Sovereignty vs universal rights: human rights in Schmidt's global politics



Schmidt took an interest in China well before becoming Chancellor, drawn above all by its prospect of emerging as a major global economic power. He was the first West German head of government to visit the country in the fall of 1975 and continued to follow its development with great interest thereafter. When the communist rulers in China violently crushed a pro-democracy movement in 1989, he refrained from publicly criticising the government led by Deng Xiaoping. In such cases, Schmidt always invoked the UN Charter, according to which no country may interfere in the affairs of another state unless matters of world peace are at stake. For him, respect for China's millennia-old culture precluded outside interference. Furthermore, given Germany's own history, the former chancellor underlined that Germans in particular should exercise restraint when criticising other countries' democratic credentials.

Schmidt believed that history has taught us that the collapse of empires and great powers was invariably followed by terrible wars. As a former soldier in the Wehrmacht, he made the prevention of such conflicts – and of war more broadly – a consistent priority throughout his career as a politician and public commentator. Accordingly, for him, stability and sovereignty were central guiding principles. Not only Amnesty International, but also many people in Schmidt's immediate circle criticised his positions on human rights issues. They consistently emphasised the universal validity of human rights. Noninterference, as it was understood by Schmidt, would mean that the international community had no leverage over dictatorships.

→ Magnus Koch is head of Exhibitions and History at the BKHS.

→ Alexander Tyssen is a trainee at the BKHS.

Humanitarian action is increasingly being asked to compensate for political failure as conflicts become harder to resolve, international law is increasingly ignored and impunity spreads. Yet, while humanitarian action can continue to save lives, it cannot indefinitely compensate for the collapse of the political and legal systems meant to constrain crises. As exemplified by the war in Sudan, Germany and like-minded states need to show political will to defend humanitarian access, uphold international law and hold those responsible for violations accountable.

SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIAN AID IN SUDAN AND BEYOND

TEXT: DAVID MILIBAND

Sudan has been at war since 2023, when fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The conflict has drawn in external backers on both sides whose interests extend beyond Sudan. It has also created the world's largest displacement crisis. El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur and the Sudanese army's last major stronghold in Darfur, fell in 2025 after a brutal siege marked by mass killings, sexual violence and displacement.

The same pattern is now threatening El Obeid: siege tactics, fears of a ground offensive and civilians caught between armed actors whose capacity to wage war exceeds the world's will to intervene. These are symptoms of a new world disorder in which impunity has become the norm in war, removing constraints and driving civilian suffering. The interplay between competing powers, shifting alliances and transactional diplomacy is eroding the protection of civilians caught in conflict.

Sudan is merely the clearest face of this disorder. But its consequences extend far beyond Sudan's borders, displacing millions, putting pressure on neighbouring states and fuelling regional instability. Other crises tell the same story as institutions built to contain them weaken when they are needed most.

The consequences of the return of the law of the strongest

Countries at the top of the International Rescue Committee's Emergency Watchlist (2026) – an annual ranking of countries with the highest risk of worsening humanitarian crises – hold 12 per cent of the world's population but account for 89 per cent of humanitarian need. Crises start more often

and end less often, as war now pays more than peace. Protracted conflicts last 30 per cent longer and are four times less likely to end: external sponsors supply money, weapons and political cover, war economies generate income, and cheap drones cut the cost of violence.

Today, the international machinery is jammed and impunity reigns. Violations of international law are commonplace. A decade after UN Security Council Resolution 2286 condemned attacks on health facilities, over 217 attacks have damaged or destroyed health facilities in Sudan since April 2023 alone. The Security Council's permanent members used their veto 49 times between 2016 and 2025 – versus 19 times in the previous decade – while 1,187 aid workers were killed, kidnapped, detained or wounded in 2025 (Aid Worker Security Database, 2026). This is what a world governed by power rather than rules looks like: wars are easier to sustain, harder to end and more dangerous for civilians.

Sudan is home to the largest documented humanitarian crisis on record: 33.7 million people – two-thirds of the Sudanese population – require aid (International Rescue Committee, 2026). However, humanitarian presence on the ground remains constrained as every attack, blocked convoy, denied permit and closed corridor shrinks the space for humanitarian actors to work. Where international access disappears, local responders become indispensable: Sudanese community networks and women-led groups are currently the humanitarian system's front line.

While the law of the strongest is back, humanitarian aid continues to save lives, yet it is asked to compensate for political failure to end wars and protect civilians. It cannot make peace or stop the killing.



A pair of flip-flops marks a place in line. In Sudan and beyond, humanitarian aid often has to compensate for political failure: people wait for hours in extreme heat for essential supplies. Here, humanitarian aid volunteers have reserved a shaded space for lactating mothers and persons with disabilities. Small acts of protection matter – but they cannot replace political will, humanitarian access and accountability under international law.

Humanitarians can feed the hungry, treat the wounded and keep communities alive, but they cannot act as a substitute for diplomacy and politics. They can staunch the bleeding; only politics can stop the killing.

Humanitarian action can survive the new world disorder, but it cannot contain it alone. International norms and humanitarian law survive not through rhetoric but through institutions that work, access that is defended and local organisations equipped to act. The question is whether governments will defend the eroding rules or accept a world in which power decides whose lives are protected and whose suffering is ignored.

From analysis to action: four recommendations

For Germany and other governments that claim to defend a rules-based international order, Sudan is a test of whether its principles can still be translated into action. Here are four concrete recommendations how they can help Sudan and humanitarian action to survive the new world disorder:

First, warnings must become actions. States must demonstrate foresight and follow-through. Germany's role in the Atrocity Prevention Coalition for Sudan and its support for anticipatory action set the right path, but more is needed to ensure that atrocity warnings from local organisations prompt international action and that anticipatory funding covers both climate- and conflict-induced crises.

Second, humanitarian access cannot be used as a bargaining chip. Food, medicine and vaccines are not political concessions. Access must be protected from political bargaining, with consequences for those who obstruct it, and donors should fund local actors reaching communities others cannot. As co-host of the Third International Sudan Conference in 2026, Germany helped secure a 1.5-billion-euro pledge and a list of principles for Sudan — commitments that must now be translated into sustained access and direct support for local responders while Germany uses its diplomatic weight to press external sponsors of the conflict to change course.

Third, the rules of war must apply to everyone. International humanitarian law loses authority when governments invoke it against adversaries but excuse its violations by partners. As Germany and other European governments raise their defence spending, that priority must be matched by an equal commitment to international humanitarian law, civilian protection and accountability for violations.

Finally, violations require political reactions. Given the Security Council's current deadlock, Germany and like-minded states should advocate implementing initiatives to limit its veto — such as the French-Mexican proposal or the ACT Code of Conduct — in cases of mass atrocity, and they should expand support for bodies such as the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan.

→ David Miliband is the president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and former Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom (2007–2010). He is also a member of the International Advisory Board of the BKHS.

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THE IRC'S MISSION IS TO HELP THOSE WHOSE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS HAVE BEEN SHATTERED BY CONFLICT AND DISASTER, INCLUDING THE CLIMATE CRISIS, TO SURVIVE, RECOVER AND REGAIN CONTROL OF THEIR FUTURE. LEARN MORE ABOUT IRC'S WORK IN GERMANY SINCE 2016 HERE →



What should guide decision-making when principles and political realities point in different directions?

"In times of geopolitical turmoil, history matters more than ever. Universal norms and principles guiding international politics emerge from significant historical processes, which are not only relevant for a better understanding of our past, but also of our present and future. Being aware of these decisive historical developments helps us to better comprehend recent conflicts to find sustainable solutions for the future, especially when principles and political realities do not match."



Fabian Klose is director of the Cologne Center for Advanced Studies in International History and Law (CHL).

Learning over lecturing

PARALLEL PERSPECTIVES FROM INDIA AND THE EU

TEXT: DAN KRAUSE (EU) & ADITI MUKUND (INDIA)

As democracy and multilateralism face mounting global pressure, reconciling political principles with strategic interests is a dilemma shared by Europe and India. The two middle powers need to move beyond lecturing and genuinely commit to mutual learning. We place their regional perspectives side by side to conduct a frank reality check, show pathways for reciprocal learning and provide a joint outlook. We evaluate the political realities in the EU and India and explore how combining complementary strengths can foster a more cooperative future international order.

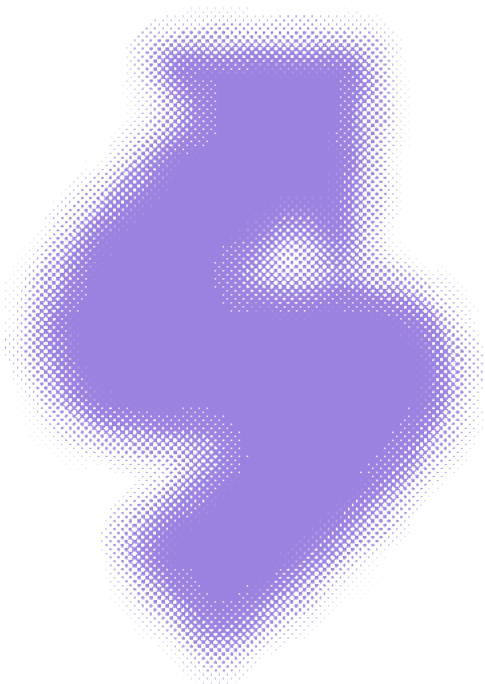
Reality check: reconciling democratic foundations with strategic interests



India: navigating democracy and strategic interests

Newly independent in 1947, India viewed democracy as a core commitment to a new political future. For Dr B R Ambedkar, architect of the Constitution, India's democratic identity at home could not be separated from the international role it sought to play, arguing that its alignment belonged with other democracies. Though discriminatory caste structures undermined Ambedkar's internationalism (Yengde, 2018), his views are just as relevant today when many assessments deem India an electoral autocracy, highlighting the criminalisation of dissent, restrictions on civil society and constraints on press freedom.

Through its current foreign policy, India does not primarily seek to uphold or defend democracy but rather secure a place in the rapidly evolving world order. Top-of-the-agenda concerns include navigating geopolitical competition and securing economic interests. Yet, despite tremendous economic growth, safeguarding human security remains a challenge. If foreign policy is a tool that delivers security, democracy is the principle that ensures its benefits are equally distributed - here India has some distance to travel.

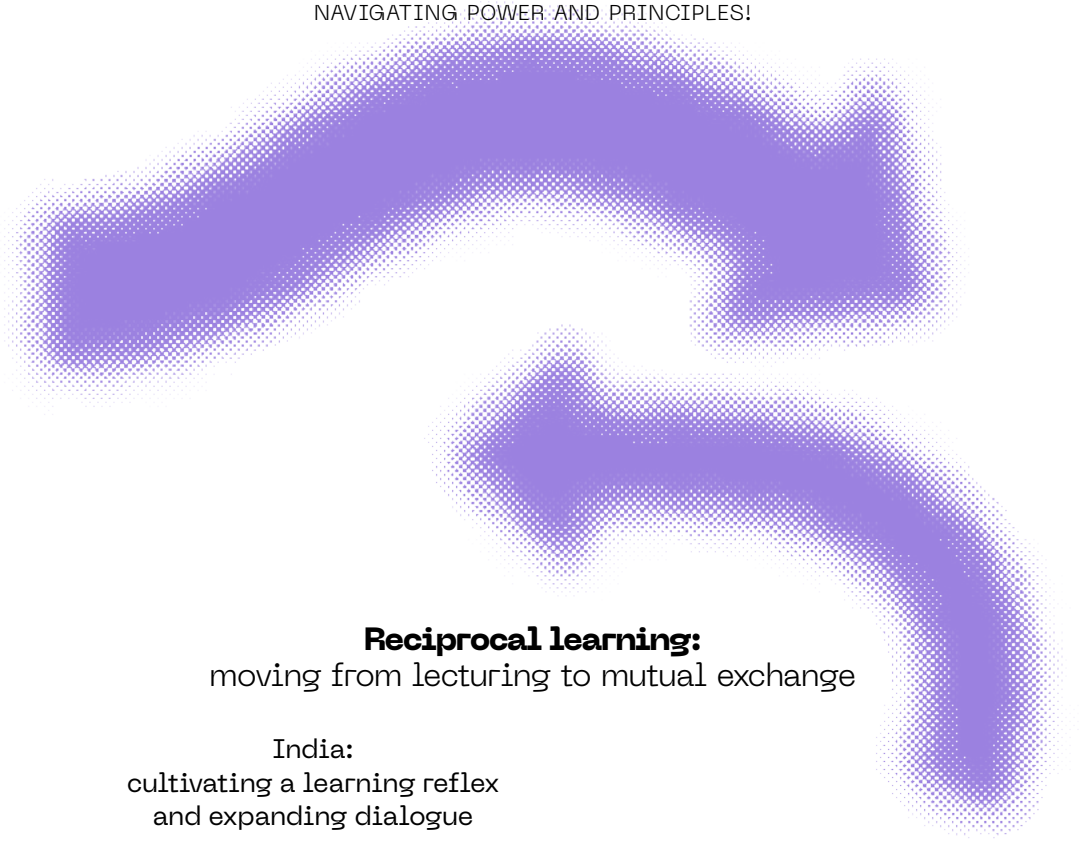


Europe: defending principles in a transitioning multilateral system

Europe approaches this tension from a different starting point. The EU is fundamentally anchored in democratic values, human rights and the rule of law. For decades, European foreign policy aimed to project these principles outward, promoting a rules-based multilateral system underpinned by international law.

However, the international environment that enabled this approach is eroding. Internally, EU member states are confronted with political polarisation and populist headwinds. Externally, power politics and transactional diplomacy are bypassing traditional multilateral forums. Europe's primary dilemma is not merely defending multilateralism globally but also accepting that it often can no longer define the rules of engagement on its own terms.

To remain a credible international player (and partner), Europe must refrain from lecturing or imposing its own normative frameworks. Instead, it must uphold its core principles while actively negotiating their practical application with partners whose historical and geopolitical realities differ from its own.



Reciprocal learning: moving from lecturing to mutual exchange

India: cultivating a learning reflex and expanding dialogue

Unlocking the potential of Indo-European relations requires abandoning the assumption that one side delivers lessons while the other receives them. Cultivating a genuine "reflex" for learning must be a precursor. While India and Europe are not necessarily "natural partners", recognising that each side has something to gain allows differences to become a basis for mutual learning grounded in respect rather than obstacles to closer cooperation. Crucially, this requires expanding the spectrum of actors involved. A major blind spot in bilateral relations is the limited knowledge of the other side's domestic affairs, which can be bridged by sustained dialogue across civil society, think tanks, research institutions and industry.

Existing structures offer a starting point. Both India and Germany, for example, are federal systems, and sister-state and sister-city partnerships have expanded in recent years. While this is a joint effort, German delegations usually travel to India more often across political levels, since German states have far-reaching powers in strategic political decisions. Despite limited interoperability within bureaucratic systems, there is scope for India to partake in federal cooperation initiatives more actively.

Europe: exchanging lessons in institutional and democratic resilience

Translating political models across different socioeconomic contexts is inherently complex. However, the value of reciprocal learning lies in exchanging strategies for institutional resilience. The EU and even more India are extremely heterogeneous regions. Now, both can benefit from sharing their experiences already gained within successful diverse partnerships.

In this regard, Europe has much to learn from India's diversity and democratic history. Europe developed its democratic architecture in a relatively stable and prosperous post-war environment protected by transatlantic guarantees. In contrast, India has sustained a vibrant, highly complex democracy since 1947 despite severe poverty, immense sociocultural diversity and a volatile regional neighbourhood. As Europe confronts unprecedented external instability and domestic polarisation, India's long-standing democratic resilience under adverse conditions can offer crucial insights for European policymakers.

Outlook:
concrete pathways for joint action

India:
youth, climate and inclusive security

A future-oriented partnership must reflect the importance of the youth in upholding democracy. For example, in July 2026, India's mass youth movement led by the "Cockroach Janta Party" successfully mobilised citizens in support of democratic accountability, exemplifying how a digital-native generation is actively engaging with democracy even amidst police crackdowns and internet bans. Policy frameworks must systematically integrate younger generations, who remain the primary drivers of democratic engagement and digital innovation in both India and Europe.

Simultaneously, the moment is opportune to broaden the strategic partnership beyond traditional hard security to encompass a more inclusive agenda centred on climate cooperation. Climate change threatens economic resilience, food security and regional stability in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. India, Germany and the EU have the opportunity to effectively step into the current vacuum of global climate leadership to push for a mutually beneficial, people-centred climate partnership.

→ Aditi Mukund is a non-resident fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) in Berlin.

Europe:
complementary strengths for a multipolar future

The future of EU–India relations rests on combining structural complementarities. The EU offers regulatory weight, capital, advanced research capacity and a unified single market, but it faces demographic aging. India on the other hand provides demographic dynamism, rapid economic scaling and pivotal diplomatic influence as a bridge between the Global South and North.

To translate these complementarities into impact, both sides must invest in institutionalised youth mobility, academic exchange and joint innovation initiatives. By combining Europe's institutional reach with India's geopolitical weight, a modernised strategic partnership can actively shape a more stable, equitable and cooperative multilateral order.

→ Dan Krause is programme director for Europe and International Politics at the BKHS.

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FINDING DIRECTION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

OBJECTS OF ORIENTATION
BY BKHS STAFF

In times of geopolitical upheaval, democratic backsliding and growing uncertainty, finding orientation has become more important than ever. When power shifts but principles remain, what helps us stay grounded? This year, we invited members of the BKHS team to share an "object" that gives them orientation. We understand the term broadly: it may be a cherished possession, a book, podcast or work of art, a meaningful place, a daily ritual or simply an idea that serves as a compass. The objects collected here offer a glimpse into the many ways people find direction in times of uncertainty. Together, they remind us that navigating power is not only about institutions and politics, but also about the personal tools, practices and principles that help us make sense of a changing world and remain grounded within it.

RUSTED TIN CIGARETTE CASE

By Merle Strunk



Description: This tin can be dated to the period before 1914, as the brand was renamed "Dalli" during the First World War. Its carefully crafted design is still visible.
When do you use it? I find myself stopping to examine it when my mind is occupied and looking for a distraction.
Why does it give you a sense of stability? As a cheap everyday item, it was never meant to endure. Yet it has survived two world wars and passed through countless hands before finding its way into my home.
Why does it help you stay on track? I admire the care that went into making this tiny thing. What we create outlives us, which is why it's worth doing things with dedication.



KNITTING NEEDLES

By Lea Holst

Description: A set of interchangeable wooden circular knitting needles
When do you use it? During creative phases and whenever I want to unwind while keeping my hands busy.
Why does it give you a sense of stability? Knitting requires just enough concentration to keep my mind from wandering, while still leaving space for conversation or a good audiobook.
Why does it help you stay on track? Knitting takes time and patience, encouraging me to slow down and challenging my perseverance in a world where everything seems to move faster. The finished pieces are something I can wear with pride or gift to people I love, creating joy for others as well.

DÖNER KEBAB

By Jakob Hofmann

Description: Salad, sauce, veal, in a bun
When do you use it? Regularly
Why does it give you a sense of stability? I rarely feel joy reading the news; however, I've never been sad eating a kebab. Critics may point out that distracting yourself from the state of the world by enjoying a kebab is merely a hypermodern version of "bread and circuses". These people have clearly never had the privilege of sitting down at a döner shop, being served Turkish black tea without even asking for it. No extra charge, no economic anxieties – just a small act of kindness and hospitality from a stranger. Both are things I personally long for in times of increasing xenophobia and intolerance.





A WALK THROUGH THE WOODS. TOUCHING ROUGH BARK. OR JUST MEDITATING ON A TREE.

By Cécile Busche

Description: Any tree works – a grand oak, a weeping willow or an earthy pine. Even that tough little birch tree you see popping out of a city drainpipe.
When do you use it? Anytime I need a little bit of peace.
Why does it give you a sense of stability? A tree is like a mini-universe. Picturing its deep roots helps me feel grounded. Its unstoppable drive to reach for the light boosts my confidence. It breathes in what we don't need and breathes out fresh air, all while sheltering birds, beetles and squirrels. I love the quiet bonds that remind me how deeply connected we all are.

A HOUSEPLANT

By C. P.

Description: This plant lost all its leaves once, but with patience and care, it is now thriving again.
When do you use it? I find myself drawn to the plant whenever I am overwhelmed by wars, divisive political rhetoric, or start worrying that our democratic structures are failing.
Why does it give you a sense of stability? The plant reminds me that although things can break down quickly, they can also recover and grow again with patience, care and hope – sometimes becoming even stronger than before.
Why does it help you stay on track? It reminds me to stay hopeful, to believe in positive change and to keep putting in the work rather than giving in to despair.





MAUSI

By Giulia Berkitz

Description: Old, wise, bruised, irreplaceable
When do you use it? Mausi has been with me since birth. I reach for her (I am convinced she is female) whenever the world gets too loud, when I need comfort, or simply want to unwind.
Why does it give you a sense of stability? Holding my entire life story within her stitches – Mausi has simply always been there and never left me. Lucky for me, she is the resilient type.
Why does it help you stay on track? Looking at her, memories come back, and I can't help but think that we both aged well. She is a common thread running through my life. Even at 60, I'm still a child at heart and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

"OM MANI PADME HUNG" MANTRA

By Miriam van der Linden



Description: It is considered the oldest mantra in Tibetan Buddhism and known as the mantra of compassion.
When do you use it? I first came across it at university whilst preparing for an exam. Since then, I've been singing it in my mind whenever I can't fall asleep or my thoughts won't settle.
Why does it give you a sense of stability? Originally passed down orally, it is still chanted around the world today, both aloud and in silence. This feeling of boundless connection and compassion gives me hope and stability.
Why does it help you stay on track? Six syllables help me focus on what really matters. It's often the small, intangible things that help us move forward.



ELSE FRENKEL-BRUNSWIK'S CONCEPT OF "AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE"

By Magnus Koch

Description: Written about shortly after the end of World War II, "ambiguity tolerance" describes the human ability to tolerate (political) contradictions and ambiguity, which is a key prerequisite for living together in a democracy.
When do you use it? Whenever I talk to people for whom everything is either black or white, truth or lies – conversations that can be particularly challenging. Lately, it feels like there are more of them.
Why does it help you stay on track? Reality is complex, and there are no simple solutions. Most people understand that and remembering this sometimes helps me find common ground, both at work and in everyday life.

MIDDLE POWER COOPERATION: EU AND SOUTH KOREA BETWEEN GREAT POWERS



Europe and South Korea face a similar squeeze between the US and China. But concrete action still trails the potential of the partnership because the two sides act under different constraints. If Brussels wants Seoul as a close partner in economic security and beyond, it must design pragmatic cooperation frameworks that do not ask it to choose a side between great powers.

TEXT: ALEXANDER LIPKE

For decades, liberal middle powers like the EU and South Korea built their prosperity on a rules-based order with open markets. Today, geoeconomic fragmentation is forcing a hard choice: how do open societies defend their strategic autonomy without sacrificing the normative rules of global trade? As Washington shifts towards protectionism and Beijing weaponises its supply chain dominance, Brussels and Seoul find themselves in a similar squeeze — yet with unequal room to manoeuvre.

The shared dilemma: geopolitical squeeze and asymmetric vulnerability

For both the EU and South Korea, US tariffs are denting revenues from one of their most important markets. Simultaneously, their economic relationship with China, the second key growth driver and export destination for the EU and South Korea over the past decades, is deteriorating. As a result of what has been dubbed the "China Shock 2.0", European and South Korean trade surpluses are turning into trade deficits and economic complementarity into competition. Decades of prioritising low-cost efficiency over resilience, coupled with the advantages of China's unique manufacturing ecosystem, have led the global market to unprecedented levels of supply-chain concentration in strategic sectors in China. Beijing's export controls on rare earths and next-generation battery technologies demonstrate how easily such dependencies can be weaponised.

For the EU and South Korea, long-held principles of an international economic order defined by ever freer trade and economic integration are now being conditioned by geopolitical power. Dependencies, and the resulting threat of economic coercion by larger powers, are constraining states' capacity to act. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney set out this diagnosis at the World Economic Forum in January 2026, proposing a "third path" for middle powers to maintain strategic room for manoeuvre and safeguard common principles and values in a world increasingly defined by power. The EU-South Korea relationship clearly demonstrates the appeal and potential of this vision, as well as the real limits imposed by divergent exposure profiles vis-à-vis great powers.

The clash of realities: hard security needs vs normative goals

Both the EU and South Korea are structurally dependent on the US for security and on China economically, prompting growing European diplomatic interest in Seoul. The leaders of Italy, France and Poland all travelled to South Korea within the span of thirteen weeks earlier this year, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz will follow in October.

This renewed interest in cooperation stems from immediate mutual needs: as Europe rebuilds its defence capabilities in response to Russia's war in Ukraine, South Korea has become a key supplier of affordable weapons systems at scale and speed. And amid supply-chain dependencies on China, Seoul is also seen as a key de-risking and technology partner in critical minerals, batteries, chip-making and AI. In return, export-dependent South Korea is seeking access to Europe's large market to cushion the economic fallout of China's global export squeeze and to mitigate its economic reliance on the US.

However, the EU and South Korea face sharply different forms of strategic exposure, shaping their immediate priorities. While Europe's share of exports to China sits at roughly 8 per cent (Eurostat, 2026) — providing a manageable buffer — South Korea sends nearly 18 per cent of its exports to China, leaving it highly vulnerable to economic coercion (Trading Economics, 2026). For its security, Europe relies on the US, but in a way that is institutionally embedded within the broader NATO framework, and its scale and nuclear capabilities give it at least a plausible chance of building deterrence without Washington. South Korea, on the other hand, relies on a direct bilateral alliance with the US while operating in a front-line deterrence posture without an alternative framework to fall back on.

While both actors' threat perceptions overlap, shared interests and values do not automatically translate into joint action priorities or ambition. Seoul prioritises maintaining its indispensable US security guarantee through accommodating diplomatic language and massive investments in American shipbuilding, chips and batteries while exercising deliberate caution towards Beijing. Having lost roughly seven billion dollars in 2017 when Beijing orchestrated a tourist boycott in retaliation against the South Korean deployment of a US missile defence, Seoul actively avoids signing on to anti-China rhetoric (Walberg, 2026). Different cost calculations inevitably constrain joint ambition in the short term and dictate different strategic approaches: The EU is tending toward regulatory and normative de-risking, whereas South Korea is prioritising quiet strategic hedging and business-led diversification.

Pragmatic alignment: cooperation among middle powers

These constraints do not preclude closer cooperation between Europe, South Korea and other middle powers; they clarify how it must be designed. Middle powers can carve out space by working together, but it will not produce an explicit alternative to autocratic blocs. Cooperation must focus on concrete shared interests and complementary strengths rather than broad ideological declarations.

Middle power resilience is built through practical, functional mechanisms. Though South Korea shares the diagnosis that Chinese economic practices are a problem, it will not join a club of countries that openly call out China or, for that matter, the US. Thus, joint action needs to be structured in a way that does not require taking a side. Regularised diplomatic formats such as the EU-Korea High-Level Economic Dialogue and the Competitiveness Partnership build mutual trust on the highest political level, providing communication channels to share threat assessments without requiring public confrontational stances. And real impact is possible even without formal coalitions or high-impact political declarations. Supply-chain diversification, for example, is ultimately driven by firm-level investment decisions, which can be framed as neutral and business-driven, while the harmonisation of economic standards can be presented as technical work.

Navigating power and principles between great powers does not require middle powers such as South Korea or the EU to join explicit anti-autocracy alliances. Instead, by quietly assembling functional partnerships in tech standards, critical minerals, batteries and defence production, Brussels and Seoul can build a resilient middle-power architecture piece by piece. This is realpolitik guided by a normative compass: expanding room to manoeuvre so that neither democracy can be coerced into surrendering its sovereignty.

→ Alexander Lipke is a research fellow at the BKHS and a policy fellow with the Asia Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

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What should guide decision-making when principles and political realities point in different directions?



"Those who want peace must also create the conditions for peace, especially now. However, when the prevailing view is that security can only be achieved through violence, genuinely peaceful solutions are all too easily lost sight of. That is why political narratives about the necessity of deterrence and the inevitability of violence must always be critically examined. Political decision-making therefore requires responsible, prudent, thoughtful and long-term considerations."

Nicole Kunkel is a research associate in the Chair of Systematic Theology at the Humboldt University of Berlin.

One wish for the future

TEXT: NATALIA MEYER



If power were not an obstacle, I would wish for democratic responsibility to guide our political order. Growing up in Colombia and building my life and career in Europe, I have seen how differently power is experienced depending on context. What appears as abstract geopolitics from one perspective is often lived reality from another – shaped by inequality, institutional fragility and unequal access to influence.

Democracy is tested most when societies are divided and uncertainty grows. In those moments, legitimacy comes not from power alone, but from accountability, respect for human dignity and the courage to uphold shared principles. Principles should not be seen as obstacles to power, but as the compass that gives it legitimacy.

My wish is for a future in which strength is measured not only by influence, but also by the ability to remain true to our values when they matter most.

→ Natalia Meyer is administration and events officer at the BKHS.

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How can liberal democracies defend their normative compass while building the strategic capabilities needed to remain effective actors in an increasingly volatile and fragmented world? The sixth issue of the BKHS Magazine delves into the imperative of "Navigating Power and Principles!" at a time when systemic rivalry and the return of raw power politics are reshaping the global order. As the boundaries between strategic interests and moral commitments blur, Europe must navigate the grey zones of today's geopolitical landscape. This issue investigates where pragmatic cooperation with non-democratic actors remains viable and where firm boundaries must be drawn to safeguard Europe's fundamental values, economic resilience and democratic integrity. Our contributors explore issues ranging from the erosion of international law and hybrid threats to human rights, global middle-power partnerships and social infrastructure as a core security asset, mapping out a path towards a Europe that is both strategically sovereign and principled at its core.

At the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung (BKHS), we connect national and international experts to tackle the pressing issues of our time, foster public discourse and shape ideas for tomorrow, honouring the legacy of one of the 20th century's most influential statesmen.

Our work centres on the following topics: Democracy and Society, Peace and Security, Economy and Justice as well as Past and Present. The exhibition "Schmidt! Living Democracy" reflects almost a century of German and international contemporary history. In the Helmut Schmidt-Archiv, we make the private documents of Schmidt and his wife Loki available to researchers and grant access to the Schmidts' former private home.

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