

## Opinion

# THERE IS MORE TO FOREIGN POLICY THAN A "CLEAR LINE"

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Matthias Naß writes about the need to combine a tough foreign policy stance with a capacity for compromise

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Foreign policy must achieve two things: It must defend liberal, Western values (which are universal values, incidentally), and it must represent the political and economic interests of the country. Reconciling these two goals is inevitably a constant source of conflict, however. If one demands that despots and autocrats embrace democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, one has to anticipate a harsh response.

Notwithstanding, proponents of democracy must be willing to adopt a "clear line" vis-à-vis dictatorships. That was the case in 1989 after the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. That was the case after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. And that was the case with Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

However, there is more to foreign policy than a "clear line", which in itself is not enough to dispel uncertainty. Those who would argue otherwise are ignoring reality. Nothing can be achieved without compromise. You have to talk to even the most unsavory regime if you want to make an impact. This is all the more true for an ally such as Turkey.

The Erdogan government's mass arrests in response to the attempted coup on July 15, 2016, were a huge overreaction. Europe and the United States rightly condemned them, but continue to work closely with Turkey. And how could they not do so? Without Turkey, we could neither cope with the refugee crisis nor fight the terrorism of the so-called Islamic State. To fail to seek dialogue with Ankara would be an act of political folly.

But when the federal government begins to hem and haw over the Bundestag's Armenian resolution, that not only blurs any "clear line" but also confuses Turks and Germans alike, as well as taking the moral and political force out of the resolution.

A clearer stance was adopted toward Russia. In response to Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine, the West imposed sanctions on Russia. These are still in force – proof that the West is indeed able to act collectively. Without the unity of the West, there would have been no Minsk Agreement. However inadequate its implementation may be, the agreement made it possible to avoid further escalation. Putin is paying a high price for his aggression and has not yet succeeded in playing the individual Western states off against each other. On the contrary, he has only reinforced the unity of the West, as demonstrated at the NATO summit in Warsaw. It was nevertheless right to resume dialogue – within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council, for example. It would also make sense to invite Putin to rejoin the G7 summits. Stonewalling does not solve problems.

A third example is China. Repression has worsened considerably since Xi Jinping became party chief and head of the government. Beijing forbids any interference and tolerates no criticism when civil-rights activists are harassed, lawyers arrested and journalists censored. However, the fear of putting a strain on relationships and losing contracts must not prevent the West from raising the subject of human rights violations. Furthermore, if the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague rejects China's territorial claims in the South China Sea in toto, only to hear Beijing decry The Hague's verdict as "disingenuous" and "null and void", then the West's and Germany's foreign policy must clearly state that both international and maritime law also apply to the People's Republic.

So a "clear line" is needed here too. On the other hand, everyone knows that the global economy and climate cannot be healthy without Beijing. There is no way around dialoguing with dictatorships. Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr were not the only statesmen who demonstrated

their understanding of this point and accordingly practiced Ostpolitik ("change through rapprochement"). Even a staunch anti-Communist like Richard Nixon was aware of it. Before he traveled to visit Mao Zedong in Beijing in February 1972, he noted the following simple question as a guideline for his negotiations on a piece of paper: "What do they want, what do we want, what do we both want?" At root, this is the essence of all diplomacy.

Rigidity and a readiness to compromise must coexist. It worked recently for the nuclear agreement with Iran. For many years, the West had imposed painful economic sanctions because Tehran continually violated the UN Security Council resolutions aimed at preventing the Iranian regime from developing nuclear weapons. In the end, the sanctions caused the regime to back down, although Tehran denies this connection. But the West not only imposed sanctions, it also forged a global alliance that even included China and Russia. Deft diplomacy made it possible to reach an agreement that will prevent an Iranian bomb from being built for at least the next ten years.

Clever foreign policy must prevent the defense of our values from conflicting insurmountably with our interests. In the event of massive human rights violations, wars of aggression, genocide, crimes against humanity, maintaining a "clear line" is the only option. Many experts on international law today speak of a "responsibility to protect" – an obligation to defend the people in other countries whose governments cannot or do not want to guarantee this protection.

Caution must be exercised, however. The "Arab Spring" and its promise of freedom effectively invited one and all to adopt a clear line vis-à-vis the autocrats ruling in the Middle East. When the intervention in

Libya began, many politicians in Washington stressed their "responsibility to protect". However, the fall of Gaddafi did not bring peace to the country. On the contrary. US President Barack Obama considers the poorly prepared intervention in Libya his biggest foreign policy mistake. The chaos that prevails in Libya is one of the reasons why he refuses to commit to military intervention in Syria to this day.

Obama's reticence – not only in Syria – has been interpreted as weakness, as a renunciation of America's claim to leadership. In fact, he prefers to assert America's interests through diplomacy and economic means. "Dropping bombs on someone to prove that you're willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force," Obama said.

A "clear line"? Yes, if that means a clear stance. Without a functioning moral compass, foreign policy loses its direction and its purpose. But if moral rigor is the only motive, then the answer must be no. The latter has already plunged the world into disaster on more than one occasion.

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