

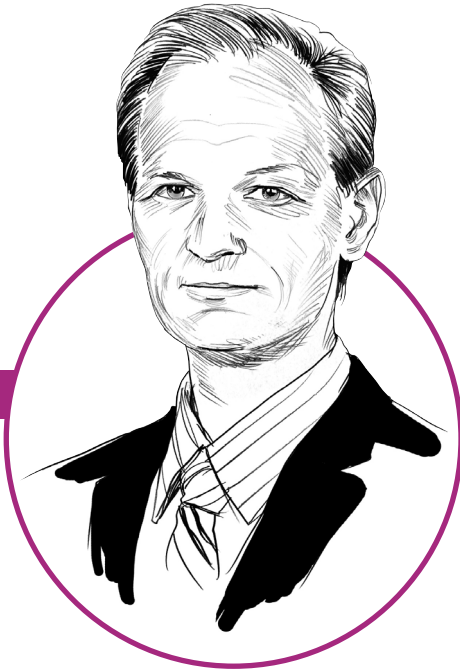
Conversation

# "KNOWING JUST HOW THIN THE ICE IS"

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Thomas Bagger, Director of Policy Planning at the German Federal Foreign Office, discusses good foreign policy with Burkhard Schwenker, Vice Chairman of Atlantik-Brücke

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**Dr. Thomas Bagger**

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**Prof. Dr. Burkhard Schwenker**

Vice Chairman of Atlantik-Brücke and head of the working group on foreign and security policy

**Burkhard Schwenker:** Dr. Bagger, allow me to begin with a quote: "We can be certain that nothing is certain. And not even that is certain!" The saying comes from Joachim Ringelnatz, and these days it seems he's right: The world has become an uncertain place. Trends are no longer stable, correlations are no longer clear, causal links are unknown and aggressors are not always immediately recognizable. How does German foreign policy deal with this situation? Or, to put that another way: What constitutes good foreign policy under uncertain circumstances?

**Thomas Bagger:** That's something we have discussed at great length in the Federal Foreign Office. 2014 was an important trigger. The administration realized it had been surprised three times over: By Russia in the Crimea and in eastern Ukraine, by Ebola, and then by Islamic State, which no one had on the radar. So we asked ourselves: What can we actually do about this? To tackle the problem, we first looked at the early-warning complex. How do we deal with signals ...

**Schwenker:** ... you mean the much-vaunted "weak signals"?

**Bagger:** Yes, the weak signals, but also the recognizable turning points ahead of crises or other events that can lead to surprises. Elections are one example. We therefore created our own department for early warning and scenario planning that also systematically incorporates knowledge from outside sources. We don't have to do it all ourselves, of course. The EU does a great deal, as do the Americans and private companies. You can integrate lots of things, then process and distribute them within the ministry and in the government. The French call this *anticipation partagée*: Who is worried about what? And if the others are doing something, maybe we should take a closer look at it too. The barrier we come up against is the fact that today we get so many foreign policy warning signals that, at some point, you ask yourself: "What do I do with them? I don't have enough resources to deal with everything."

**Schwenker:** Especially because the signals not only need to be processed but also translated into actions, don't they?

**Bagger:** The interface between "early warning" and "early action" is crucial. The Ebola epidemic is one example of this. There were numerous signals, but it took months before we were actually able to mobilize the resources and put in place a seamless rescue chain. If I want to send German aid workers to help, I also have to be able to guarantee that I can get them back to the Robert Koch Institute for treatment if necessary. The whole thing is very time-consuming.

**Schwenker:** So it's not just about early warning, but also about flexibility?

**Bagger:** Exactly. We have to be more flexible and ask ourselves how we can keep personnel, expertise and resources on stand-by so that we can deploy them quickly in a crisis. Take Mali, for example. We've got a small embassy there, not even a handful of people. We also have a West Africa department that isn't much bigger. When an international crisis suddenly breaks out, we are immediately reliant on reinforcements. For that you need flexibility in the system, which we haven't had thus far. In the past it was often the case that, in times of crisis – in Kosovo, for example, and again later in Afghanistan – we spent a lot of money building up effective structures. At some point, the crisis blows over and the people involved are transferred all over the world, which means that the expertise is lost completely.

**Schwenker:** And that's changed now?

**Bagger:** Yes! That's precisely one of the reasons why we deal with early warning and scenario planning and why we have created this section within the new department for crisis prevention and stabilization. It re-

flects a new way of thinking. Where foreign cultural and educational policy is concerned, it's been established for some time. The same ultimately applies to what we do with humanitarian aid and stabilization projects as well. We're not talking about development aid, but about attempts to create the time and space for political processes when crises occur.

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**"We have to be more flexible and keep personnel, expertise and resources on stand-by so that we can deploy them quickly in a crisis."**

*Thomas Bagger*

**Schwenker:** Alongside more flexibility, I believe the real answer to uncertainty lies in management. These days, you can no longer lead by numbers and manage by objectives, because you continually have to anticipate fundamental changes in the prevailing conditions. In situations like these you need convictions and a clear strategy. That is the opposite of the American "light footprint" concept of not becoming established, not tying down resources, always staying as flexible as possible. Where corporate leadership is concerned, such an approach harbors the risk of arbitrariness. How do you see that in relation to foreign policy?

**Bagger:** If you're just looking at foreign policy, there is much to be said for keeping as many options open as possible. The more established you become, the more difficult it is to adapt to changed circumstances when they occur. But that simply doesn't work in internal discussions of foreign policy, where you need a clear idea of what you want, a defined orientation. Otherwise, at the end of the day you have no ground to stand on. Brexit is a good example of what I mean. If you are no longer able to mobilize a majority internally to back a specific foreign policy direction, then the rug is pulled out from under your feet.

**Schwenker:** Is foreign policy discussed and communicated with sufficient intensity and depth inwardly, i.e. with a country's own population? I believe there are a lot more possibilities and needs here – including the need for orientation.

**Bagger:** When Steinmeier became Foreign Minister again, he said that for a country with as strong international ties as this one, a country so dependent on a functioning world order, it simply cannot be that so little importance is attached to foreign policy in public discourse. So, to answer your question: No, it is not communicated well enough. Since "Review2014", however, we have done a lot more than we were doing three years ago. If you mentioned public diplomacy in the past, everyone instinctively thought about what an embassy communicates to the society of its host country. Now we do a great deal more in our own country, in various formats and with different partners. If people don't believe foreign policy is important and don't understand what the possibilities but also the limitations of diplomacy are, then at the end of the day they won't support what we're trying to do – neither in relation to Russia nor with regard to Syria.

**Schwenker:** To what extent does traditional public diplomacy still play a part in communication with other countries? Thinking of the USA, for example, during the current election campaign in particular, it's not hard to see that there is a great deal of skepticism about anything that comes from the outside.

**Bagger:** When Trump says: "What Mrs. Merkel has done over there in Germany has caused crime rates to skyrocket", that is important for us. You can imagine the anxious questions the embassy then has to deal with! Can I still travel, can I still do business in Germany and so on. It's important to counter such views with facts, using all the options we have at our disposal, through interviews or articles or statements or denials, even if our voice is perhaps not as loud as that of someone like Donald Trump.

**Schwenker:** So shouldn't we be doing more? Shouldn't there be a big campaign in America – as part of our foreign policy – that says "That's not the way it is, things are completely different!"?

**Bagger:** That's a good question! We also discussed that intensively in relation to Brexit. When do I really think I'm making a positive difference? When do I run the risk of being counter-productive? There's no easy answer to that. Just by way of an example: No one argued against Brexit more convincingly than Barack Obama in London, but opinions differ considerably on whether or not that was really any use at the end of the day. The reason is that, in a situation like this, you always end up serving both sides: Those who feel their arguments are confirmed and those who say: "Look here, we're fed up of being dominated by outsiders and told how we should do things!"

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**"Shouldn't there be a big campaign in America – as part of our foreign policy – that says 'That's not the way it is, things are completely different!'?"**

*Burkhard Schwenker*

**Schwenker:** Let me frame the question more suggestively: What you are describing now is "politically correct" foreign policy communication. But could we not also start a campaign in which the Foreign Ministry does not appear directly as the originator? Couldn't we take a more "hybrid" approach, if I may use such a term. Is something like that a legitimate tool of foreign policy?

**Bagger:** To a certain extent we'd almost be using Kremlin-style methods there. But that too is something we have to deal with. If politics is

increasingly campaign-driven, you obviously have to question your own campaigning abilities. The challenge we saw last fall made this issue particularly important. We had to ask ourselves how we could counter the rumors circulating in Afghanistan that anyone who made it to Germany would get a house and a car. In that regard, it is an entirely legitimate question. Whether it's also a legitimate tool at the end of the day depends on exactly how you go about it. In the USA, the big issue in relation to Russia is not Syria or Ukraine, but how the Democratic National Committee was hacked, the Colin Powell e-mails and other things that suddenly spill over into American political debate via Wikileaks. Here, we would naturally say that is not right. But in the end it is also a means of strategic communication.

**Schwenker:** When it comes to the hybrid nature of measures, networking plays an important role. Is our foreign policy today joined up? Do you share your scenarios with the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry for Economic Affairs? Is there a discussion about it or even a common scenario?

**Bagger:** At the moment, there is no all-encompassing future scenario, but rather dialogue on specific situations that we are confronted with. That's something we do with external parties, but also with the planning office for the German army, for example. It's still not linked up very systematically between relevant ministries. One of the attempts to do something like this is based at the Federal Academy for Security Policy. This is a neutral platform where various different departments can come together without worrying about who is responsible for what, which can make cooperation difficult. There's one other point I believe is important: The sense of uncertainty and the pressure that goes along with that is much more marked at the top of the pyramid than at the bottom. Those at the bottom believe: "Those at the top know what they're doing." However, those at the top know that they don't know what kind of an

environment they will have to find their way around and act in day after day. They know how thin the ice under their feet is.

**Schwenker:** I see that as the big challenge to leaders. You have to make people aware of dangers, but not leave them completely unnerved. The "sense of urgency" must be communicated positively in order to achieve motivation.

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**"Our intensive coverage of crises means that people now perceive foreign policy as important again."**

*Thomas Bagger*

**Bagger:** That's one reason why the topic of Agenda 2030 and sustainable development has played such a prominent role in the Steinmeier speeches over the past few months. Our intensive coverage of crises means that people now perceive foreign policy as important again. That was indeed one of our aims at the beginning of this legislative period. But if everything is always about a sense of crisis, that will be counter-productive. What we need now is to broaden our horizons again and emphasize more strongly that it is possible to shape the future. What politics needs is a discourse of hope, not one of crisis.