

Examining the EU's Ability to Shape Global Politics

Interview with Tobias Debiel on the Peace Report 2021

Prof. Dr. Tobias Debiel is Co-Director of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research, as well as Deputy Director of the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) at the University of Duisburg-Essen.

QM | The Peace Report of the leading German peace research institutes has been examining the global situation since 1987 and each year makes clear recommendations for German policy in Europe. The fact that this year is different did not escape the Peace Report's purview.

Prof. Debiel: That is absolutely right. The transatlantic relationship in particular has undergone a fundamental change since Joe Biden took office. In previous years, the EU had to struggle to preserve and defend key achievements of global cooperation within the framework of international institutions. Now, under the new president, the U.S. sees itself as a leader of multilateral problem-solving and democratic values. This normative shift is also influencing geopolitical

constellations. Former U.S. President Donald Trump had virtually abandoned friendship and partnership with Europe in the form we had known for decades; Joe Biden, on the other hand, is demonstrably seeking collaboration. This is meant seriously, but not altruistically. He is interested in an alliance vis-a-vis the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. These are seen not only as rivals for spheres of influence, but also as ideological opponents. The EU cannot afford to be equidistant from the geopolitical power poles on this issue. At the same time, it must be careful not to be drawn into a replay of Cold War thought patterns.

QM | Europe can do more; Europe must also want more. But Europe finds itself in a changed field of forces. What power-political challenges does the Peace Report see?

Prof. Debiel: With regard to Europe, the relationship with Russia, which is at an atmospheric low, is central. Western policy after the Cold War, which took little account of Russian interests and perceptions, is certainly partly responsible for this. A great power that was already in decline was given the impression that it should just be recognized as a regional power that was also to be contained. In the past decade, however, Russia under Putin has significantly undermined the basis of trust for reliable cooperation. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which violated the territorial sovereignty of an OSCE member state, was a dramatic blow. Moreover, the violent conflict in Ukraine continues, not least in light of Russian support for insurgent regions. In the Syrian war, Russia has sided with the brutal Assad regime and blocked the UN Security Council. Repression of Russian opposition figures is also on the rise. Finally, it is hard to avoid the impression that the Russian leadership is interested in destabilizing Western democracies.





Prof. Dr. Tobias Debiel, photo: Political Moments

QM | But isn't the real geopolitical challenge for Europe the relationship with the rising world power China?

Prof. Debiel: Quite so. As the EU rightly points out in its strategy documents, China is a partner, competitor and rival at the same time. In the U.S., the dominant perception is one of geopolitical and ideological rivalry. And there are good reasons for this, if we only think of the territorial conflicts in the South China Sea, the interference in Hong Kong or the suppression of the Uyghurs in China's northwestern province of Xinjiang. However, confrontational thinking neglects the fact that we are in urgent need of cooperation on mankind's problems such as global climate change – and that the Chinese leadership has also shown itself willing to cooperate. Nor can it be denied that China has provided important impetus for infrastructure development in emerging and developing countries with its Belt and Road Initiative and its proactive Africa policy. Even if there is competition with the West in these areas, the interest in the stability of crisis-prone countries also unites them. This is where we need to start.

QM | In conflicts, diplomacy relies on negotiations and talks even with actors perceived as difficult. At the level of heads of state, Biden recently demonstrated this when he met Vladimir Putin in Geneva.

Prof. Debiel: After harsh rhetoric – including in-person – toward Putin, the summit was an important step by the Biden administration to re-engage in dialogue with Russia. This does not sweep any problems under the rug, but it follows the détente logic that for all the antagonisms, dialogue must not break down. Russia's ability to constructively shape world politics is admittedly limited. But there are a number of conflicts in which it is influential as a veto player. Against this backdrop, it is also crucial for the EU not to let

contact break off despite an icy climate. The conflicts in Ukraine and the southern Caucasus in particular cannot be settled against Moscow's will. The EU should use all means of diplomacy here, for example by appointing a special representative for the Ukraine conflict. And it should strategically consider where economic incentive systems increase Russia's and regional actors' willingness to cooperate.

QM | In view of Russia's behavior in recent years, however, should the EU not rather play the sanctions card?

Prof. Debiel: I am generally cautious about the effectiveness of sanctions against major powers. Certainly, such measures are sometimes unavoidable in the case of serious breaches of international law principles and gross human rights violations in order to credibly condemn such violations. Sanctions also serve to reassure the West, which should not be underestimated, by drawing red lines, so to speak, with regard to the counterpart's willingness to cooperate. But they rarely lead to a change in behavior on the part of powerful states. Rather, they often trigger a rally 'round the flag' effect, i.e. the government in question can mobilize internal support against outside interference.

Probably the most effective lever for Germany against Russia is the Nordstream 2 project. I consider it highly problematic from a geopolitical and ecological point of view. However, the German government got involved with it and cannot abandon it without high costs. In addition, contractual compliance is an important component of reliable relations. For this reason, suspending and terminating the project is probably only the last resort in the event of another serious violation by Russia, such as a deliberate aggravation of the situation in Ukraine. I hope that a situation does not arise where this decision is acutely necessary.

QM | As central as the European challenges are, doesn't the ability to shape global politics that you call for also involve the EU becoming more visible globally, such as in the fight against the Covid 19 pandemic?

Prof. Debiel: Indeed, the response to the pandemic requires a global effort. In the spirit of global solidarity, the EU is called upon to initiate significant financial transfers for the Global South that will benefit the vulnerable parts of the population. Debt relief is a prerequisite for poor countries in the Global South to mobilize additional resources to combat the direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic. COVID-19 has led to new problems in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. In the health sector, the challenge is to maintain basic services in many countries and expand access to public health systems for all population groups. Governments in the Global South depend on international support to make the necessary investments. It is therefore important to further expand existing initiatives, such as the EU's cooperation with the African Union. The Global South is also dependent on international solidarity for the supply of COVID-19 vaccines. Last but not least, it is important that the temporary waiver regarding patent protection remains on the international agenda. This is not a panacea, but it can, together with technology and know-how transfer, possibly contribute to the medium-term development of corresponding production capacities in the Global South.

QM | In the Peace Report, you argue that the consequences of the pandemic extend far beyond the health sector. What other repercussions are there?

Prof. Debiel: The pandemic has very obvious effects on extreme poverty and food security. Although data is difficult, estimates from the World Bank and the Food and Agricultural Organization suggest that the setbacks to the relevant SDGs are severe. Active follow-up is needed here to prevent a lasting downward trend. Incidentally, a setback in the fight against poverty can only be mitigated in the wake of the pandemic if the marginalized in urban areas are taken into account and social security systems and labor market policy instruments are expanded. Last but not least, the pandemic has highlighted the danger of international interdependencies and the vulnerability of globalized supply chains to crises. A partial decoupling of food markets, shorter supply chains, increased local production and the principle of food sovereignty can help prevent future crises. Developed countries also need to transform and regulate supply chains beyond agriculture. Following the adoption of the Supply Chain Act in Germany, it is now falls on the EU to make the next move.

QM | Professor Debiel, thank you very much for this talk.

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