Summary report: 22nd FSS Security Talk – with Prof. Dr. Herfried Münkler

The global security situation has deteriorated significantly in recent years. The power of the strongest is increasingly supplanting the rules-based world order. Against this backdrop, we welcomed Prof. Dr. Herfried Münkler, one of the leading experts on geopolitics in the German-speaking world, to the 22nd FSS Security Talk. In his in-depth analysis, Prof. Münkler addressed three key topics: the new era of power politics, the future of the (transatlantic) West, and the question of whether Europe will be able to assert itself as a political actor or whether it will degenerate into a mere object of foreign interests.

Presentation by Prof. Dr. Herfried Münkler

1. Section 1: A new era of power politics

Prof. Münkler began by looking back: after 1989, Europe had hoped that the establishment of a rules-based order would bring an end to the era of power politics – the very power politics that had led the continent into disaster in the first half of the 20th century. From then on, the use of force was to be subject to a regime of rules, and war in Europe was to become a thing of the past. Indeed, Europe disarmed after 1989. A great sense of relief spread and lasted for a long time. No one imagined that conditions could change again. It was assumed that 1989/90 marked a fundamental turning point in history and that politics would be permanently different thereafter – at least no longer characterized by the brutal power politics of earlier times.

1.1. Replacement of military power by economic power

The prevailing view was that military power could be replaced by economic power as an instrument for controlling the international order. Sanctions were intended to have a deterrent effect. The economic advantages of this new order were reflected in a “peace dividend” (Helmut Kohl), which was primarily invested in expanding the welfare state – a necessary measure in many places, but one that was also associated with a further reduction in military capabilities.

1.2. Juridification of international politics

Parallel to the rise in economic power and its growing importance vis-à-vis military power, the idea of the juridification of international politics gained acceptance. Arbitration tribunals were to resolve disputes between states without the need to resort to military force, as had previously been the norm. This form of dispute resolution was significantly less costly than maintaining a comprehensive military apparatus.

In a broader sense, this normalization of politics led to states partially losing their monopoly on political decision-making. International organizations and NGOs increasingly acted as stewards of the global and universal. However, with changing conditions, it can be assumed that power will return more strongly to the states – those actors that demand obedience but also offer protection.

1.3. “… imagining the horizon of expectation as a space for experience”

Looking back, it can be said that the order established after 1989 was tailor-made for Europeans in terms of their own ideas and capabilities. Compared to the major powers, they have always had less military power, but economically they were largely on an equal footing.

Today, the question arises as to whether this order, based on economic power and legally regulated politics, was more of an ideal than a political reality. In a sense, we imagined "the horizon of expectation as a space of experience": we assumed that we would naturally operate within this order without ever seriously questioning this assumption.

1.4. The unresolved questions of the rules-based order

Looking back, it is clear that key questions about the imagined rules-based order remain unanswered. First and foremost is the question of who would act as guardian of this order. A rules-based order requires an actor who ensures that breaking the rules is unattractive. So who took on this role? The UN regularly blocked itself in the Security Council, while the OSCE remained a "negotiating forum" without any power to enforce its decisions.

De facto, the US was most likely to take on the role of guardian – but often confused this with the position of master. This confusion is understandable when one considers the role of guardian in the light of the theory of the commons: international security is a good that belongs to everyone and cannot be privatized. Everyone benefits from it, regardless of whether they contribute to it. Those who invest bear the brunt of the burden. This "tragedy of the commons" leads the main investor to eventually ask why they should continue to bear this burden. This is exactly what happened under Trump. From this perspective, it is logical that the US should either position itself as a superior power or withdraw from the role of guardian in the long term.

Obama's "pivot to Asia" in 2011 already indicated that the US was no longer prepared to project its power simultaneously and equally in the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions in the 21st century. This strategic shift was a clear harbinger of change, but its significance was widely underestimated. Trump's "America First" policy then explicitly marked the rejection of the guardian role: the focus was no longer on global welfare and global security, but exclusively on American interests. Despite the clarity of the message, many assumed that Trump was a temporary phenomenon. However, his political comeback and the radical national egoism that accompanies it show that this attitude has taken on a structural character. This is evident in the termination of international commitments, the cutting of funds for UN organizations – in other words, the dismantling of the "soft power" that Joseph Nye spoke of – and the fundamental questioning of NATO.

Another open question concerned how to deal with Putin as a notorious rule-breaker. Ultimately, Russia could not be sanctioned by the international community, particularly in the UN Security Council, as this was prevented by the vetoes of not only Russia but also China.

With the war against Ukraine and the simultaneous intensification of hybrid warfare against Europe, Europeans found themselves in a "sandwich position": between Russian threats and American blackmail. A rules-based order has been replaced by a power-based order – an order with completely different imperatives. Many refuse to accept this and cling to the hope that we can soon return to the situation before 2022: to normal relations with Russia, to the use of Russian raw materials, to a reliable transatlantic partnership independent of changes in the American government.

Even if the future remains uncertain, one thing is clear: Europe will have to be able to stand on its own two feet. “Strategic autonomy” is the buzzword – and it encompasses far more than the term suggests at first glance.

2. Section 2: What will become of the West – the transatlantic West?

2.1. Review: What was the West?

We have traditionally thought of the West as a geopolitical actor that is present on both sides of the North Atlantic, that represents a mutual alliance, and that has indeed been one of the stabilizing anchors of world politics for a long time.

The establishment of the West followed the old geopolitical maxim that one must control the opposite coast – a principle that the Americans did not yet have in mind when they withdrew from Europe at the end of the 1910s. They had assumed that the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans were wide enough to serve as security barriers. However, the years 1941/42 painfully demonstrated that this was not the case. Japanese aircraft carriers created the conditions for attacks on the US, specifically Hawaii (Pearl Harbor), and German submarines sank cargo ships off the American east coast. These experiences led to Truman's decision to remain in Europe after the end of World War II – and to ensure that the “opposite coast” remained under control and that the Soviets could not advance to the Atlantic. The same later applied to East Asia, where the US had fought wars in Korea and Vietnam.

Ultimately, the West as a geopolitical power was something like a life insurance policy for Europeans in terms of security policy. People believed they could rely on it. After all, the Americans had stationed not only their European commands in Germany, but also those for the Middle East and North Africa. Europe was certain that this would remain the case – why would the US give up this constellation? In principle, it would mean relinquishing control of half the world.

2.2. The destruction of the West

Obama's “pivot to Asia” was a cautious hint that the transatlantic West as a geopolitical force in its old form would soon cease to exist. Trump, of course, has shattered the West, not only in geopolitical terms, but also in terms of values and in its third dimension, the economic dimension.
Trump has irreparably shattered the West as a force in international politics. Ludwig Wittgenstein's statement “Words are deeds” applies nowhere more than in international politics. Once there is doubt as to whether Article 5 of the NATO Treaty applies without restriction or only to those who invest, for example, two or three percent of their gross domestic product in security, this is de facto an invitation to NATO's opponents to test how far they can effectively go before Article 5 of the NATO Treaty actually takes effect.

In concrete terms, this means that for Putin and his followers, following the script of the Ukraine war, an attack on Estonia, or more precisely the so-called Narva tip, could be the next logical step. The Americans will do little to protect it. Whether the Europeans are prepared to fight back and defend the Baltic republics also remains to be seen. The stationing of a German tank brigade in Lithuania is at least a clear sign of this and can be seen as a declaration that we Europeans now stand up for Article 5 of the NATO Treaty and its unconditional application.

2.3. Trump's strategy

If there is a strategy behind Trump's actions, it is that he believes he can find a cost-effective substitute for the American withdrawal from Europe. This includes, for example, claiming Canada as the 51st state or acting aggressively on the Greenland issue, although Iceland is likely to be the next candidate from a geographical point of view. He has found what he believes to be a significantly cheaper barrier with better defensibility, only it is no longer located in Europe.

However, Trump did not leave it at that. Instead, he also questioned the West as a value-based political entity and, at the same time, everything that connects both sides of the Atlantic: the commonalities of the democratic constitutional state, the constitutional binding of the will of the people, the vital civil society, the corruption-resistant administration, but also the historical parallels such as the Atlantic Revolution – note, for example, the current attacks on civil society in the US or the prevailing nepotism in the Trump administration. Whether the democratic institutions of the US will be able to stand up to Trump is an open question.

Added to this is the economic dimension – the challenge to the existing economic cycle posed by Trump's tariff threats. Trump has called all three elements into question. He is not only concerned with reducing costs for the US, but also with completely breaking away from Europe. Whether this is wise, given that – as he himself emphasizes – the main conflict in the future will be with China, is another question. Ultimately, there is no need to worry about Donald Trump's wisdom and predictability, because any thoughts on the matter may be rendered obsolete the very next day on a spontaneous whim.

3. Section 3: What might a future world order look like?

3.1. Hierarchy or anarchy?

The question arises as to whether the future international order will be characterized by a hierarchy or by anarchy among states – the latter in the sense of the realist and neorealist schools of international relations. In an anarchy of states, one would not know in the evening with whom one would be allied or at odds the next day – a situation that prevailed in Europe in the 1930s: politics based purely on opportunistic considerations. A hierarchical world of states, on the other hand, would be characterized by a few superpowers acting as a directorate of the world order. Game theory considerations suggest that such a hierarchy would have to consist of five superpowers. With five players, the incentives to participate actively would be great enough; with a larger number, individual influence would be reduced, while costs would be relatively higher. Reducing the number of leading powers to three would easily create 2-to-1 constellations, which are considered particularly prone to war. It is no coincidence that five states also have veto power in the UN Security Council. A look at history supports these considerations: since the 16th century, so-called "pentarchies" have repeatedly emerged in Europe.

3.2. A new global pentarchy

From today's perspective, the emergence of a new global pentarchy would probably be the most advantageous scenario for Europe. It would include the US and China, as well as Russia – not because of its technological strength, but because of its considerable mineral resources and, above all, its nuclear arsenal. This, in turn, is a bad sign, as it means we can say goodbye to the

history of non-proliferation. There will be more nuclear powers in the near future, a new rush for nuclear weapons, so to speak.

This is reinforced, for example, by the situation in Ukraine. Looking back, people there will ask themselves: If we had not signed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which we handed over the inherited nuclear weapons and delivery systems from the bankruptcy estate of the USSR to Russia under pressure from the US and the United Kingdom, would the annexation of Crimea or an open attack ever have happened? Other states are watching this experience very closely.

India could be considered the fourth player in such a pentarchy, and Europe the fifth – but only if it succeeds in making the transition from being a busy regulator and rule manager, the often-cited "bureaucratic monster in Brussels," to a truly politically capable player.

3.3. Return of the Empires

We are witnessing a return to imperial politics – something that many long considered impossible. Russia is organizing its spheres of influence primarily with the help of military power – one of the few means at its disposal. The focus is not solely on Ukraine, but on the entire Black Sea region. The 2008 war in Georgia and attempts to influence elections in Romania also fit into this strategy. Russia is, in a sense, encircling the Black Sea and seeking to transform it back into a Russian inland sea.

Added to this is Russia's growing presence in the Sahel region and Libya. The Sahel region is considered a central hub for the distribution of migration flows. Accordingly, it can be assumed that a possible attack on the aforementioned Narva peninsula would be coordinated with targeted refugee movements towards the Portuguese-Spanish islands off the West African coast. This would result in NATO naval units being withdrawn from the Baltic Sea and redeployed to this area. This would tie them down there, giving Russia greater freedom in the Baltic region to pursue its imperial ambitions.

China's imperial strategy, on the other hand, is closely linked to the "New Silk Road" ("Belt and Road Initiative") and generous infrastructure investments in countries that will later be unable to repay these investments. China then willingly defers repayments – but with the expectation that the countries concerned will not support anti-Chinese resolutions. This approach is not limited to Central Asia or southern Africa, but has also reached Europe, for example through the 17+1 format, to which several EU member states even belong. As a result, the EU must expect increased internal resistance in the future when it comes to taking a critical stance toward China.

In the US, imperial behavior is evident in Donald Trump's confrontational stance toward Canada and Greenland, as well as in his "Golden Dome" initiative – the revival of Reagan's idea of a comprehensive missile defense system that would make the United States virtually invulnerable. Realistically, this amounts to nothing more than a new round of arms buildup.

3.4. What structures must Europeans establish to ensure their influence?

Europeans are also under pressure to act and must secure their own spheres of influence. This includes controlling the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea – the two inland seas bordering Russia. It also concerns Africa, in particular the stabilization of the Maghreb coast opposite, with a profound impact extending into the Sahel region. Migration flows represent a significant

vulnerability for the European order and thus offer an attractive starting point for Europe's opponents to deliberately stir up unrest by means of the “weaponization of migration.” Europe must therefore try to bind the states on the opposite coast – from Egypt to Morocco – more closely to the EU in some way, so that the current potential for blackmail, which is increasingly threatening to become a bottomless pit, is weakened. At the same time, an appropriate presence in the Sahel region is necessary.

Within the European Union, it is also imperative to end the principle of unanimity. This rule should have been abolished at the latest with the eastward expansion, as it effectively grants each of the 27 member states a right of veto. In addition, the EU needs flatter margins and a hierarchy at its center. At present, we are seeing a resurgence of the Weimar Triangle – the Paris-Berlin-Warsaw axis. This would need to be complemented by closer ties with the British and the involvement of Italy. Such a communitarization could, as a “coalition of the willing,” take over foreign and security policy, which is currently largely uncommunalized.

In a further step, Europeans would have to be prepared to provide NATO's commander-in-chief themselves in the future – especially if the Americans reduce their presence in Europe to such an extent that they no longer see any reason to do so. Previous resentments, national sensitivities, and historical traumas have led to a preference in Europe for an American commander-in-chief. However, if this is no longer an option and Europe wants to assert itself as an independent player, it must be prepared to take on this role itself. One possible model would be for the countries of the aforementioned “coalition of the willing” to provide the commander-in-chief on an annual rotation basis. However, this would require a European general staff – a fundamental element of this approach. This would also render debates about an independent European army largely obsolete. All that would be needed would be a staff to coordinate the national armies – similar to the “German Army” in the First World War, which did not exist as such but consisted of several “regional” armies that were coordinated among themselves. Such a model would create a dynamic that would enable even neutral states such as Switzerland to decide whether they want to participate or remain subject to the decisions of others.

Ultimately, Europe needs a broad portfolio of different types of power. In addition to a significantly stronger military component, this includes catching up with the US in economic and technological terms. This includes an independent presence in space and activities in the fields of digitalization and artificial intelligence. The goal must be for European states and companies to no longer have to store their most sensitive data in the clouds of American companies and for Europe to have its own systems to compensate for a failure of Musk's Starlink, for example.

All this will require considerable effort. Politicians today are faced with decisions of a scope and depth that they are not accustomed to. This new mindset must also be supported by a majority of citizens – a particular challenge for democratic constitutional states compared to authoritarian regimes.

Münkler concluded by noting that after lectures, he is occasionally asked whether he is an optimist or a pessimist. He is neither, he said, because he does not generalize either the best case or the worst case. But he wants to be confident. He understands confidence as the ability to see crises as opportunities. The pressure described at the beginning – the sandwich position between Trump and Putin in which Europe currently finds itself – could ultimately prove to be the necessary external help that Europe needs to finally reach the strategic height required for its future capacity to act.