

RE:THINK

ACADEMY-MAGAZINE #04

ACADEMY
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS^{OT}
NRW

Subnational
Diplomacy
Shaping
Global Affairs

MESSAGE FROM MINISTER MONA NEUBAUR



Dear Readers,

North Rhine-Westphalia has long understood that international cooperation is no longer shaped solely in national capitals or through multilateral institutions. Regions, cities, research organisations and economic actors across the globe have been starting initiatives and forged partnerships that respond directly to shared challenges and promising opportunities. This growing significance of sub-national diplomacy reflects a simple reality: many of the questions that define our future are best addressed through collaboration that is both globally connected and firmly rooted in specific regional strengths.

I am convinced that North Rhine-Westphalia is well placed to contribute to this debate, which is the focus of the current issue of AIA Magazine. As one of Europe's largest industrial regions, home to outstanding research institutions and a globally connected business community, our state has always prospered through openness, intellectual exchange and innovation-driven adaptation. More so as priorities such as structural transformation, climate resilience and technological leadership cannot be met in isolation, but need to be embedded in partnership networks.

The Academy of International Affairs NRW plays a vital role in this regard. Since its establishment, it has become an outstanding platform for international policy research

and dialogue. In keeping with this dialogue, the examples presented throughout this volume also resonate with initiatives that North Rhine-Westphalia is pursuing in its own policy agenda. Our recently adopted "Raumfahrtchancenpapier" with its strategic guidelines for harnessing the vast opportunities the growing space sector offers, illustrates how regional governments can actively shape international partnerships in strategic technologies. By expanding cooperation with partners such as Piedmont or regions in the Benelux countries, we seek to strengthen European innovation ecosystems with regards to space, support necessary industrial transformations and contribute to Europe's technological sovereignty in this critical domain. Such evolving partnerships thus demonstrate that sub-national diplomacy is increasingly becoming an instrument for advancing one's own competitiveness, while working towards greater economic and ecologic sustainability as well as shared security and prosperity.

The Academy's work reminds us that promising and feasible solutions can emerge where intellectual curiosity meets political responsibility. By convening international expertise and encouraging open debate, the Academy contributes to the evidence-based policymaking that successful democratic societies depend upon. In doing so, it also reinforces North Rhine-Westphalia's role as a place where international perspectives are welcomed, connected and – in the best case – translated into practical implementation. I therefore hope that this edition of the AIA Magazine inspires its readers to recognise the growing contribution that regions, cities, researchers, industries and other communities can make for tackling common challenges. Strengthening these connections will remain an essential task in the years ahead – and one that North Rhine-Westphalia, together with our partners across Europe and beyond, will continue to both benefit from and contribute to.

Mona Neubaur MdL

Minister for Economic Affairs, Industry,
Climate Action and Energy of the State of
North Rhine-Westphalia

EDITORIAL



“Five years are a brief moment in the life of an institution. In international politics, however, five years can redefine an era.”

Dr. Mayssoun Zein Al Din

When the Academy of International Affairs NRW was established five years ago, the world was already facing profound geopolitical shifts. Yet few anticipated the speed and magnitude of the transformations that would follow. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally challenged the European security architecture. The Middle East has entered another period of devastating escalation. Strategic competition between major powers has deepened. Technological disruption has accelerated at an unprecedented pace. And Donald Trump's return to the White House has further amplified geopolitical uncertainty and intensified debates about the future of transatlantic relations, international institutions, and the resilience of a liberal international order.

In this environment, societies need more than policy responses. They need spaces for strategic reflection. This conviction has shaped the Academy from its very beginning. The Academy was founded on the premise that rather than reacting to events, independent fellowships should foresee emerging developments before they become dominant political agendas. Over the past five years, our annual research themes have succeeded in anticipating debates that have since moved to the centre of international policymaking.

Our inaugural fellowship programme in 2021 explored Artificial Intelligence and International Politics before artificial intelligence became one of the defining geopolitical issues of our time. We then focussed on the Geopolitics of Disinformation, recognising that information had become a strategic domain of international competition, subsequently turning our attention to Outer Space Affairs before space security had emerged as a mainstream concern of international politics. Those topics were followed by our work on Translocalism and Subnational Diplomacy, highlighting the growing international agency of regions, cities, and local governments in times when global governance increasingly depends upon actors beyond the nation-state. Most recently, our work on Structural Transformations as a Challenge and Chance for Politics, Economy, and Society has examined how societies navigate profound political, economic, technological, and social transitions.

We chose these themes because we believed they would shape the debates of tomorrow.

This forward-looking perspective remains the defining characteristic of the Academy.

Our commitment to ensuring that excellent international fellowships create tangible value for North Rhine-Westphalia has been equally important. As Germany's most international region and one of Europe's largest economic and industrial centres, North Rhine-Westphalia occupies a unique position within global political and economic networks. That is why the Academy deliberately seeks to connect cutting-edge international research with the strategic interests of the state, facilitating dialogue between academia, politics, diplomacy, business, civil society, and public administration.

Over the past five years, we have welcomed outstanding fellows from every continent, scholars whose research is at the pinnacle of their respective fields and whose perspectives have enriched Germany's academic landscape in lasting ways. Their work has generated new knowledge, strengthened international scientific cooperation and broadened intellectual exchange across disciplines and cultures.

This anniversary edition of RE:THINK reflects precisely this intellectual ambition.

The contributions compiled here address many of the defining questions of our age. They explore a changing international order, strategic competition between China and the United States, the consequences of war and conflict from Sudan to Europe, and the rapidly expanding role of emerging technologies in defence and security. They examine how subnational diplomacy, from North Rhine-Westphalia to Brazil, be it city diplomacy or parliamentary cooperation, has become an increasingly important pillar of international affairs. They analyse structural transformation through perspectives ranging from industrial transition and hydrogen policy to social resilience and youth participation. Finally, they investigate new forms of global cooperation, questions of strategic autonomy, soft power, multilateralism and the future of comprehensive security.

Looking ahead, the Academy will build on the foundations laid over the past five years by placing Comprehensive Security at the centre of its future fellowship programme. As the boundaries between security, technology, economics and society continue to blur, we are convinced that this integrated perspective will become indispensable in understanding the international politics of the twenty-first century.

This milestone would not have been possible without the remarkable people who have shaped the Academy from its very first day. Thank you to my team.



Dr. Mayssoun Zein Al Din

Executive Director of the Academy
of International Affairs NRW

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CONTENT

2026



INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY

- 10** **INTERVIEW:**
The Conflict in Sudan. Travel Impressions
from Port Sudan to Khartoum
Navid Kermani
- 14** **INTERVIEW:**
Two Chinas, One Question for Europe
Mikko Huotari
- 18** How the Trump Administration Is Pursuing AI Dominance
Melanie Sisson
- 20** **INTERVIEW:**
5 Questions for Armin Laschet
Armin Laschet



SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY SHAPING GLOBAL AFFAIRS

- 26** Duisburg. Subnational Diplomacy Between Speculations and Strength
Anna Shpakovskaya
- 28** Resilience and Frontsliding. European Capital of Democracy
Tamara Ehs
- 30** Subnational Diplomacy. A New Hope for International Affairs?
Editorial Team
- 34** City Diplomacy in NRW. Three Cities, Three Questions, Three Answers
Ayan Huseynova, Theresa Reymann, Heike Maus, Mika Ache
- 38** Subnational Governments and Climate Governance Challenges
Débora Prado
- 40** **INTERVIEW:**
The NRW-USA Parliamentary Friendship Group as a Bridge Builder
Angela Freimuth

STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

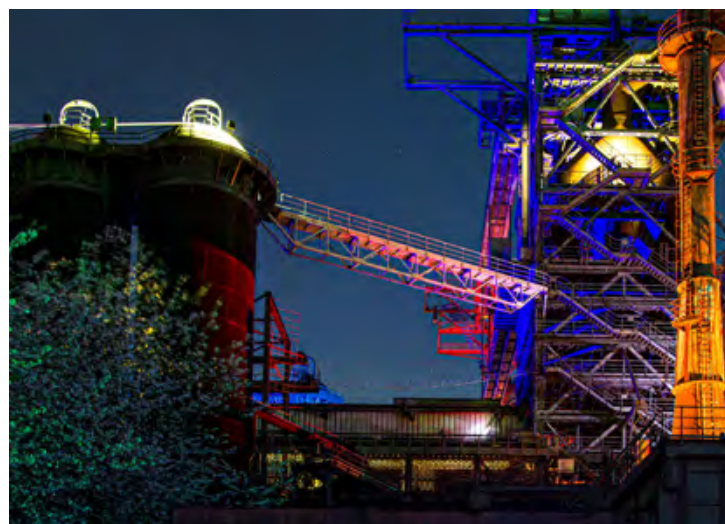
- 44** Together in Transition. Lessons from the Ruhr to Rust Belt
Emily Adams, John Austin, Lucas Kreuzer
- 46** Post-Socialist Social Policies. Old Ideas Are Coming Back
Karolina Kluczevska
- 48** EU's Regulatory vs. South Korean Developmental Hydrogen Policy Leadership
Bohyun Kim
- 50** The Kids are Alright. Young People and Soft Power
Chisomo Banda

NEW PATHS FOR GLOBAL COOPERATION AND SECURITY

- 54** **IN CONVERSATION:**
A Changing World Order. Europe's Strategic Role
Mayssoun Zein Al Din in conversation with Christoph Heusgen
- 58** Germany and Namibia. The Past in the Present
Henning Melber
- 60** Belonging Rules. Governing Identity in Multi-Ethnic Society
Ifedayo Malachi
- 62** Soft Power in an Age of Rupture. What the Evidence Tells Us
Stuart MacDonald
- 64** Relations Matter. China's Balance of Relationships Approach to Multilateralism
Chiung-Chiu Huang
- 66** Rethinking Global Politics in Crisis Times
Martin Weber

THE ACADEMY OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

- 70** **INSIDE AIA**
- 76** Members of the Academic Board
- 80** Academy Events
- 86** Imprint



INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND COMPREHEN- SIVE SECURITY

With shifts in power, new alliances and global crises challenging the established order, we highlight some of the key actors and developments, including the foreign policies of the US and China, and the war in Sudan. The aim is to adopt as multifaceted and holistic a perspective as possible, which can be summarised under the heading of 'comprehensive security'.

THERE IS
ALWAYS
HOPE

The Conflict in Sudan.

Travel Impressions from Port Sudan to Khartoum

INTERVIEW with **Navid Kermani**



You recently traveled to Sudan. Was there any one particular moment or situation that helped you to understand the nature of this war more clearly than any geopolitical analysis can?

There is no single clear explanation for this war, so no single situation can account for everything, either. But if I had to pick out one experience that repeated itself every day, then it would be whenever I asked if anybody could tell me something about the war—having breakfast at the ful stand, in the teahouse, at the market. I was immediately surrounded by a crowd of people, one horrific story after another raining down on me: the executions the tea vendor witnessed, the ful vendor's severed toes, the burned-out stalls that the market vendors had let the elderly use for free so they wouldn't have to beg, and so on. The people are completely traumatized. And everywhere I went, along the Nile and in the outskirts of Darfur, the RSF was always blamed for the horror. I'm sure it would have been a different story if I'd asked in the regions under RSF rule, in the west and south of the country—but then I imagine only among the Arab population, whose interests the RSF represents, because Black Africans in Darfur and Kordofan are also fleeing the RSF by the millions.

Sudanese civil society has played a remarkable political role in recent years. What remains of these forces in the current war, and do we in the West underestimate their importance for the country's future?

I have spoken with numerous activists, especially with female activists—and yes, they are still active, for example in the many Emergency Response Rooms that were set up during the revolution and continue to provide tremendous humanitarian aid. But fear of the RSF is so great, even among the activists, that they are now largely rallying behind the army, against which they had, after all, staged a revolution. People who were imprisoned during the military dictatorship told me that saving the country had to be the priority, and that the revolution would continue once peace prevails. I must add, though, that most activists don't just put their faith in a military solution like the state does; they also advocate for a process of reconciliation. After all, federalism is one of the core demands of the revolution, as is the separation of state and religion. The RSF and the representatives of the Black African ethnic groups might actually find common political ground if the RSF's incomprehensible terror were not driving the activists back to the state.

The war in Sudan is often described as a power struggle between two generals. Does this interpretation fall short? What political, social, and historical fault lines are we overlooking if we view it solely as a conflict among elites?

When you consider that virtually no one is fleeing into RSF territory, but rather that nearly all of the 14 million people who were or are fleeing are fleeing from the RSF, it becomes clear that the Western narrative of two equally evil generals fighting each other can hardly be accurate. Nevertheless,

there are internal causes for the war, and the RSF acts as the representative of segments of the population whose marginalization is very real. But it's not quite that clear-cut, either, because there are two lines of conflict. To put it very simply: between the Arabs in the Nile Delta and the Arabs on the western periphery on the one hand, and then the even older conflict between Arab-descended and Black African populations on the other hand. But since those two lines overlap, it keeps leading to shifting alliances within the country.

Sudan is no longer an isolated conflict zone. What role do external actors—both regional and global powers—play specifically in this war? And how do their interests and methods of influence differ?

The situation in Sudan has never been truly stable since the beginning of Egyptian and British colonization—just think of the recurring wars since the Mahdi uprising at the end of the 19th century. But the current explosion has been triggered partly by external factors—namely, the struggle among regional powers for gold, water, farmland, and control of the Red Sea—with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Iran, and Eritrea backing the army, and the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, General Haftar's eastern Libya, and Israel on the side of the RSF. As is so often the case, there are no good guys in this war.

But the United Arab Emirates clearly bears the greatest responsibility for the disaster in Sudan. It's all documented: the airports in Chad and Libya through which weapons and Colombian mercenaries are flown in, the Emirati corporations that control the farmland and mines in Darfur, the factory in the Emirates that smelts the gold from Sudan that finances the war, the Swiss gold refinery where the Sudanese gold is delivered via the Emirates. If Iran is indirectly responsible for October 7th due to its support of Hamas, then the Emirates are directly and severely responsible for the RSF's crimes. And while Israel has killed some sixty thousand people in the Gaza War, many of them civilians, the RSF slaughtered more people in El Fasher alone within a few days, almost all of whom were civilians.

If you then ask yourself why the UAE is nevertheless not subject to sanctions like Iran, and why it isn't in the global spotlight of activism like Israel, you quickly become aware of its numerous corporate holdings and investments in the West, and of the glitzy image the Emirates have built for themselves with billions of dollars—through paid influencers, Dubai chocolate, art biennials, and soccer clubs competing in the Champions League. And it's no secret that the UAE's destructive acts are by no means limited to Sudan—just think of Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and the Middle East conflict. And as much as we may not want to admit it, the UAE in fact acts like a rogue state.

If we place the war in Sudan within the broader context of current conflicts, is it a symptom of a fragmenting world order, or does it follow its own logic that we shouldn't be too hasty to generalize to the global level?

The war is not only, but also, a consequence of the United



States' withdrawal as a stabilizing force. Just cast your mind back to the previous civil war, which the United States helped end by—rightly or wrongly—facilitating the partition of Sudan. The lack of interest in Sudan—or indeed in any region that does not directly affect American interests—did not begin with Donald Trump. Joe Biden, too, had already lost interest in Sudan, meaning that during the 2022 coup, there wasn't even an American ambassador in the country who could have protested. Trump himself appeared clueless

on camera when, a few days after the storming of El Fasher, the Saudi crown prince asked him to mediate in the war during his visit to Washington. But Europe's role in Sudan is also highly questionable. You need look no further than its cooperation with RSF leader Daglool on migration control.

The International Conference on Sudan took place in Berlin while you were in Sudan. UN Secretary-General António Guterres criticized both the conference and the efforts

“As long as we don’t have a consistent and unified European foreign policy, we will remain at the behest of geopolitics as opposed to playing an active role.”

Navid Kermani

made so far as insufficient. Do such forums have a real political impact, or do they simply reveal the structural powerlessness of international diplomacy?

These formats have little political impact because they don’t dare to call out those responsible for political decisions. Between January and September of last year alone, the Emirates exported gold worth 27 billion to Switzerland, a large portion of it from Sudan! Yet not a single European government has so far been able to bring itself to impose an import ban on Sudanese gold, something that experts have repeatedly called for because it would benefit the country more than any aid shipment.

Europe often views Sudan primarily through the lens of migration and stability. To what extent is Europe actually part of this complex web of conflicts—politically, economically, or normatively? And where are the blind spots in the European perspective?

Unfortunately, Europe has little influence on the war in Sudan, and on the same counts for the conflicts in Gaza, Iran, and Ukraine, even though it is severely affected by the consequences of each. As long as we don’t have a consistent and unified European foreign policy, we will remain at the behest of geopolitics as opposed to playing an active role. We are currently feeling the effects in the form of high energy prices and the resulting economic crisis, to name just the most obvious example. We could also talk about migration, supply chains, terrorism, drugs, and climate change—all global issues that have a direct local impact.

The term “comprehensive security” seeks to conceive of security in a sense that goes beyond the military. Does such an approach do justice to the reality of a conflict like the one in Sudan, or does it simply reveal its very limitations?

I get the impression that this approach reaches its limits where Sudan begins. Unfortunately, there is very little to no evidence of a broader concept of security there. No one seems to take a holistic view of internal and external, civilian and military, or state and private threats there. Europe convenes conferences to organize aid without addressing the political causes of the war. The Americans, who could exert political influence, simply cut off aid. Regional powers arm the respective warring factions, who deliberately target

civilian infrastructure—markets, hospitals, dams, power plants, and so on. If the aim of comprehensive security is to collectively defend and maintain a society’s vital functions, come what may, then what’s happening in Sudan is the exact opposite.

You are currently the Director’s Guest here at the Academy. To what extent do we need spaces like this for reflection and encounter, especially in times of multiple crises, and what can institutions like the Academy achieve that political processes alone often cannot?

I believe that institutions like the Academy can and should, above all, make it clear that global developments, and especially the wars and disasters in Eastern Europe and the neighboring regions to the southeast, directly affect us, even in our daily lives. It’s not out of altruism that we should be concerning ourselves with these issues, but also out of self-interest. ■



Navid Kermani lives in Cologne as a freelance writer. He holds a postdoctoral degree in Middle Eastern Studies and has taught as a visiting professor at numerous universities. Navid Kermani regularly reports from war zones and crisis regions. He has received numerous awards for his literary and essayistic work—including the Kleist Prize, the Joseph Breitbach Prize, the Hölderlin Prize, and the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade—and, most recently, the Thomas Mann Prize for his novel “Das Alphabet bis S”.



Two Chinas, One Question for Europe

INTERVIEW with **Mikko Huotari**

A China stuck in structural crisis, and a China racing ahead in technology and industry; a country with global aspirations and limited integration. We spoke with **Mikko Huotari**, Chair of the AIA Academic Board, about how to read the two Chinas at once, what Beijing's global ambitions and limits actually look like, and what all of this demands of Germany and Europe.



MIKKO HUOTARI is Executive Director of the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin. Since last year, he chairs the International Academic Board of the AIA NRW; he also co-chairs the German Bundestag's China-Kommission.

How did you come to choose China as your primary research focus?

The first fascination came from books that parents and teachers shared with me – from Gerd Ruge's hefty yellow-bound *Begegnung mit China*, picked up at a flea market, to books on Chinese philosophy passed on by my saxophone teacher. As part of a student academy programme I was excused from school for several weeks and started learning Chinese. I later deepened those interests in Freiburg, in the Asia studies environment around my academic mentor Jürgen Rüland. I was fortunate that German foundations and research institutions began turning their attention seriously to China in the 1990s and 2000s. Joining MERICS in 2013 was, I still think, a real stroke of luck: the institute was looking for exactly the profile I had, and working at the intersection of policy and research has been the right fit for me ever since.

What were your impressions of your trips to China, and what has changed since your first visits?

My first trips in the early 2000s were a very different experience. The country was just beginning to take off, and as a student I was driven mainly by curiosity – getting to know the place with an open mind and building personal connections. Today's trips are much more official and tightly scheduled; that often comes at the expense of the kind of unhurried encounters I valued then, which I regret. The atmosphere has also changed, in interesting ways. In the early 2000s,

“The question is whether Europe helps shape what comes next, or simply reacts to it.”

Mikko Huotari



especially in Beijing, you could feel a vitality in the air – a belief that anything was possible and that the future would definitely be better. What I see today is more layered. Parts of the country feel weary – the steam has gone out of the old growth model, and the confidence with it. Other parts of China feel tired in a quite different way: they are running flat out – in advanced manufacturing, in technology, in research – and the pace itself is wearing on people. “Weary modernity” and “tired modernity” exist side by side, and the combination is part of what makes today’s China so hard

to read from outside. Travel itself, by the way, is still not a given – which is one reason maintaining direct contact matters as much as it does.

Your impressions certainly differ from the image that continues to be conveyed in politics and the media. How do you define your role in this context?

Everyone has their own frame of reference – I’m no exception. What I try to do is bring the macro picture from data and analysis into dialogue with what one can still glean on the ground – from Chinese counterparts, from businesses operating in the country, and from diplomats and others working there at close range. The aim is to learn from the comparison and to let others draw their own conclusions. We have to accept that there are at least two Chinas running in parallel. There is a “70 per cent China” that, at the macro-economic level, is not working – stuck in a deep, structural crisis. And there is a “30 per cent China” that represents the engineering state at its best: highly innovative, with functioning supply chains and global reach. The interesting question is not which of these is the “real” China, but how the two are connected, where the combination is going, and what it requires of those of us who have to live with it.

Against this backdrop, how do you assess the “Peak China” thesis – the expectation that China has already passed its zenith in global politics?

That debate was perhaps a little more heated three years ago than it is today. Power and performance are always relative: if the “70 per cent China” is weakening, the more relevant question is how it is weakening relative to other major economies. The view from Beijing, put bluntly, is that “the winner is whoever loses less and looks better in the process”. That may sound pessimistic, but I would argue

Xi Jinping adapted his system very early to the turbulent international environment we are now in, and that has to be factored in. At the same time, China is on an economic and demographic plateau, and we should not underestimate the immense internal restructuring under way – or the costs that Chinese families are absorbing day by day.

Globally, Beijing's ambition is unmistakable: a leading role in shaping the next phase of the international order on its own preferred terms – in finance, technology, security and norms. The Global Development, Security and Civilization Initiatives, the steady push for renminbi use in cross-border trade, the export of EV and clean-tech capacity, and the alignment with Russia and large parts of the Global South are all part of that picture. The limitations are just as real: a deep trust deficit in Europe and much of Asia, Western technology restrictions that are biting harder than Beijing expected, friction with neighbours from India to Japan, and a financial system not yet ready to underwrite a genuinely global currency. Peak or not, China will remain a major shaping force; what is genuinely open is how much of its own agenda it can actually impose.

Do we in Germany and Europe still view China too much as a monolithic bloc – do we need a more nuanced picture of China?

We do need a more differentiated understanding, and frankly a degree of empathy for the social and economic pressures Chinese society is absorbing – without losing sight of the fundamental differences in the political system. Superficially plausible comparisons – “China and Germany are both export nations” – sound reasonable and yet quietly produce bad policy conclusions. The bigger problem in our public debate, though, is the persistence of clichés and stereotypes – of the unstoppable China and the collapsing China, of the cynical official and the powerless citizen. They make for good headlines but bad strategy, and they crowd out the harder analytical work that the situation actually demands.

How do you see Europe's strategic positioning in the geopolitical context between China and the United States?

That brings us to the question for Europe. We are neither economically nor politically integrated enough for the role we are trying to play. We are attempting to compete with two major power centres – and to cope with what is happening in the rest of the world – without the institutional foundations that would let us do so. The challenges are particularly acute for Germany, and so far our political responses have not matched their scale. What we need is a more ambitious and more coherent strategy, working on four



fronts at once: robust responses to the specific challenges China poses, developed together with partners rather than alone; resilient engagement with China itself, staying in the conversation and doing the diplomatic and economic work, but on terms that protect our interests; sustained investment in our own model – economic, technological, social – because credibility abroad rests on capability at home; and an active willingness to help shape the transformation of the international order, not merely defend the version we inherited. The order we have is already changing. The question is whether Europe helps shape what comes next, or simply reacts to it. ■

How the Trump Administration Is Pursuing AI Dominance

How much safety does artificial intelligence require – and how much pace can it handle? A look at US AI policy reveals a clear shift in direction between regulation and radical acceleration. How do different governments strike a balance between innovation, risk and global power? What are the implications for the economy, the military and international cooperation?

Countries seeking to develop modern technologies enabled by artificial intelligence (AI) must contend with the same dilemma: to prioritize speed or safety. The United States has been inconstant in answering this question. Changes in presidential administration, from Donald Trump's first term to Joe Biden's, and now back to Trump's second, have been reflected in national AI policy. The result is that much like the presidents themselves, the U.S. approach to AI across administrations has more differences than similarities.

To be sure, the three administrations all agreed that AI innovation is a matter of strategic importance and that the

United States must achieve superiority in the industries that are the backbone of AI development and in its military applications. They have some substantial disagreements, however, on how to do so.

The first Trump administration oriented AI policy on getting the federal government organized and engaged. The 2019 "American AI Initiative" framed AI as a strategic economic and national security asset and focused on coordination. It emphasized increasing federal R&D, supporting technical standards, expanding the AI workforce, and encouraging private-sector innovation without adding new regulation.

The Biden administration was comparatively more attentive to the consequences of AI innovation gone wrong. It was concerned that inadequate focus on fairness and safety would erode public trust not only in AI technologies themselves, but also in the companies that produce them and the institutions responsible for governing them. The desire to guard against these outcomes was a driver of the October 2023 “Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy AI,” the establishment of the U.S. AI Safety Institute, and the brokering of voluntary commitments with leading frontier labs. These initiatives codified the administration’s view that sustainable progress is not possible without guardrails that prevent a race to the bottom, where speed is prioritized over minimizing the risks of dangerous, damaging, or destabilizing outcomes.

By the end of 2025, the second Trump administration had produced policies with a clear accelerationist bent. It traded the language of safety, ethics, and international coordination for the vocabulary of speed, scale, and dominance. The implication is that the administration worries less about misuse of AI, social equity bias in its design, and the risk of catastrophic AI-enabled events than it does about delay. It therefore views regulatory requirements as the enemy of AI innovation. This makes releasing AI companies from such restraints key to ensuring U.S. AI dominance into the future.

Although the administration has not undone all Biden-era safety initiatives, it has issued a sequence of executive actions to aggressively deregulate infrastructure construction, to preempt state-level safety mandates, and to cultivate an “AI-First” military culture. In the physical domain, Washington has moved to minimize regulatory processes that impede the AI industry’s access to electricity and land. Under “America’s AI Action Plan,” unveiled in mid-2025, qualifying data centers are no longer regulated as commercial real estate, but they are designated as critical national security infrastructure. This reclassification allows federal agencies to bypass long-standing environmental and permitting requirements, and clears the way for rapid construction on federally managed lands.

The Trump administration has moved with equal alacrity to centralize AI policymaking. In December 2025, it issued an executive order asserting federal preemption over state-level AI regulation and specifically targeting safety

requirements—such as liability rules and algorithmic bias constraints—previously advanced by states like California and Colorado. Through litigation and conditional federal funding, the administration has moved to neutralize state resistance, ensuring that American AI developers operate under a single, permissive national standard.

The most recent shift is in the administration’s approach to AI in the military domain. In January 2026, the Pentagon released the “Artificial Intelligence Strategy for the Department of War,” in which it formally adopted an “AI-First” posture.

It is a strategy oriented around velocity, introducing seven “Pace-Setting Projects” it describes as constituting an “acceleration approach” to the department’s acquisition and adoption of advanced AI. In so doing, it jettisons the traditional requirements and accreditation cycles that have long managed how private sector technology enters the U.S. military. These processes undeniably slowed technology adoption, but in return, they conferred benefits in network and systems security, and in supporting Congress’s ability to exercise oversight of Department of Defense (DOD) spending.

In lieu of process, the strategy privileges pace. It requires, for example, that any frontier AI model released by the private sector—from companies like OpenAI, Google, or xAI—is available for military exploitation within one month. So, too, does it orient effort around developing military AI agents—applications that do not inform actions, but that directly implement them.

Some European observers are sure to object to Washington’s accelerationist philosophy and to be alarmed by its possible implications for DOD operations. Such reservations are not unfounded, but neither can it be assumed that the administration’s

ambitions for speed will be fully realized. This is particularly true for the DOD AI strategy. It must still contend with the Pentagon’s large and well-entrenched bureaucracy and with the preference of many of its senior military officers and line staff. These are professionals who are trained to have a healthy appreciation for reasonable control over reflexive action. Nonetheless, even if the emphasis on pace does not deeply penetrate U.S. institutions in the near term, the directional change in U.S. policy can be expected to complicate transatlantic cooperation on AI development, governance, and military use. ■



MELANIE SISSON is a member of the Academic Board of the Academy of International Affairs NRW. She is a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution’s Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology where she researches the use of the armed forces in international politics, strategies of deterrence, U.S. national security strategy, and defense policy. She is author of *The United States, China, and the Competition for Control* and co-editor of *Military Coercion and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Use of Force Short of War*.

5 Questions for Armin Laschet

INTERVIEW with **Armin Laschet**

Five years after founding the Academy of International Affairs, our Director met with Armin Laschet to look back and ahead. They discussed the Academy's role in an era of shifting global order, Europe's strategic future, and why international perspectives matter more than ever.



“The Academy of International Affairs was founded to strengthen our state’s standing on the international stage.”

Armin Laschet

1. If you were to start from scratch again today: would you set up the academy in exactly the same way, or would it take on a different profile – perhaps even a different remit – given the circumstances of 2026?

When the Academy began its work in 2021 to mark North Rhine-Westphalia’s anniversary, the role of international politics was not yet what it is today.

However, North Rhine-Westphalia has always had a very international outlook. In particular, we collaborate with Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, even holding joint cabinet meetings. We have partner regions in France, the USA and China, and traditionally close ties with Israel, and we are involved in numerous international collaborations in academia and business. North Rhine-Westphalia is, for example, one of the most important investment destinations for Japanese companies. Bonn was the federal capital for decades; today, the city is the only seat of the United Nations in Germany. And with the UNDP’s partial relocation from New York to Bonn, its importance is set to grow further.

The Academy of International Affairs was founded to strengthen our state’s standing on the international stage. The aim is to promote international research and pool knowledge. We want to attract top researchers and foster the transfer of knowledge. That is why international fellows are invited to apply and conduct research at the Academy. This mandate for the Academy was already important five years ago, but today it is more important than ever.

2. The Academy was founded at a time when multilateralism still appeared to be relatively stable. Today, we are living in a more fragmented and conflict-ridden world. What can and must an institution like the Academy achieve today that was not foreseeable five years ago?

Multilateralism was already in crisis five years ago. As early as 13 September 2017, in my first policy statement as the newly elected Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia, I highlighted the growing scepticism towards free trade. Donald Trump was then at the start of his first term in office. Even back then, there were wars in the European Union’s neighbourhood – in eastern Ukraine and in Syria. We were importing gas from Russia and were aware that our foreign policy relationship was strained. North Rhine-Westphalia was affected by Brexit, as the volume of trade with

the UK declined noticeably afterwards. Due to the large numbers of refugees arriving in our region, foreign policy even had an impact on local politics.

Russia is now waging war against the whole of Ukraine. We are strengthening our defence capabilities in Europe, partly because we can no longer rely on US support as we did before. The US intervention in Venezuela without prior consultation with its allies, as well as the debate over Greenland, have eroded trust. The situation is similar with Iran, where the Americans are evidently acting without a strategy.

Our foreign policy must become more strategic and forward-looking.

We tend to analyse the world through our own lenses. This is where the Academy’s international fellows can make an important contribution, as they challenge our ways of thinking and open up new perspectives for us. It is particularly helpful when our attention is drawn to conflicts or potential future crises that we had not previously considered. In that respect, the Academy set an example early on: topics such as artificial intelligence in international politics or issues relating to space policy were on its agenda long before they were widely discussed in Germany. That is precisely what I expect from such an institution – namely that it paves the way for the geopolitical debates of the day after tomorrow.

3. Europe is clearly struggling to define a common role in foreign and security policy. In your view, is it more the strategic clarity or the political courage to put this into practice that Europe is lacking?

In any case, Europe must become more strategic and bolder, but above all more capable of taking action and more united. Most of all, we need the will to play a shared role in the world. European integration has been a great success. Following the UK’s withdrawal, the EU still comprises 27 Member States, and there are nine candidate countries. The EU has always been successful where Member States have had the courage to cede sovereignty. The single market and the euro are proof of this.

That is particularly difficult in foreign policy, where Member States still cling to the principle of unanimity. The transition to majority voting is urgently needed. We have to speak with one voice on the world stage.

In the spring of 2002, the European Union, the United Nations, Russia and the US established the Middle East Quartet. The aim was to support and coordinate peace efforts between Israelis and Palestinians.

Particularly in a world that has become more unstable, it is important for the EU to drive forward similar diplomatic initiatives. We should not stand by and watch as Donald Trump sends two American businessmen and property developers to Moscow to discuss an end to the war against Ukraine. European sovereignty means acting and speaking for ourselves and not leaving Europe's fate in the hands of the US.

We see Eurosceptic and populist parties in many Member States, some of which are even in government. And yet, since Brexit, no other country has dared to leave the EU. We can plainly see that the world's major powers are ruthlessly abusing their power for their own ends. Moreover, Europe is no longer the centre of the world. We live in a world with a population of over eight billion people, but only around 5 per cent of them live in the European Union. New markets and new technologies are emerging; alongside Russia and the US, China and India are gaining in importance.

So it is even starting to dawn on the Eurosceptics that any country acting alone would become a pawn of the major powers. Only together can we exert influence on the world stage. If the European Union did not already exist, we would have to invent it all over again. This realisation is beginning



to take hold and will continue to gain ground. What Europe needs now is the will to take responsibility and to shape its own future.

4. When looking at foreign policy debates today, we can often get the impression that terminology changes more quickly than strategies. Which term or narrative is currently dominating the debate unfairly, and which one is missing?

We should be cautious with our words. At present, we are all too often resorting to war rhetoric. There is a difference between speaking about 'war readiness', as the Defence Minister does, and speaking about 'defence capability'. We do not want to wage war; we want to be able to defend ourselves.

“The Academy enriches the research landscape.”

Armin Laschet

We moralise within the EU and lecture the rest of the world. For some, it is simply a case of either/or – black or white. But surely 'both/and' would be better. During the Cold War, NATO deterred the Soviet threat through rearmament and nuclear weapons. At the same time, however, there were offers of dialogue and negotiation with Moscow. This principle was applied from the Harmel Doctrine right through to the NATO Dual Decision. The aim was to preserve the possibility to resolve fundamental political issues. In my view, this foresight is lacking today.

5. Five years on from its founding: what was the moment when you thought to yourself, 'This Academy has been worth it'? And what do you think it absolutely must achieve over the next five years?

It had already proved its worth by the time the first fellows began their work. The Academy enriches the research landscape. It provides high-calibre forums for discussion, produces excellent publications and helps to strengthen North Rhine-Westphalia's global networks even further.

There were many moments when the specific benefits of this Academy became very clear.

Shortly after the end of the mission to the German Bundestag, when we discussed the evacuation of local staff in Afghanistan, the NRW Academy of International Affairs brought together international experts – including the head of NATO's Civil Protection Centre – with Members of Parliament, the Enquete Commission, the Committee of Inquiry and the then Minister of Defence.

It was a similar situation when the Federal Government presented its first China strategy and we in the Bundestag were able to hear a first-hand Chinese perspective on relations with Europe from Academy Fellow Zhang Xin from Shanghai. Such perspectives are rarely available otherwise. This is how North Rhine-Westphalia influences German foreign policy.

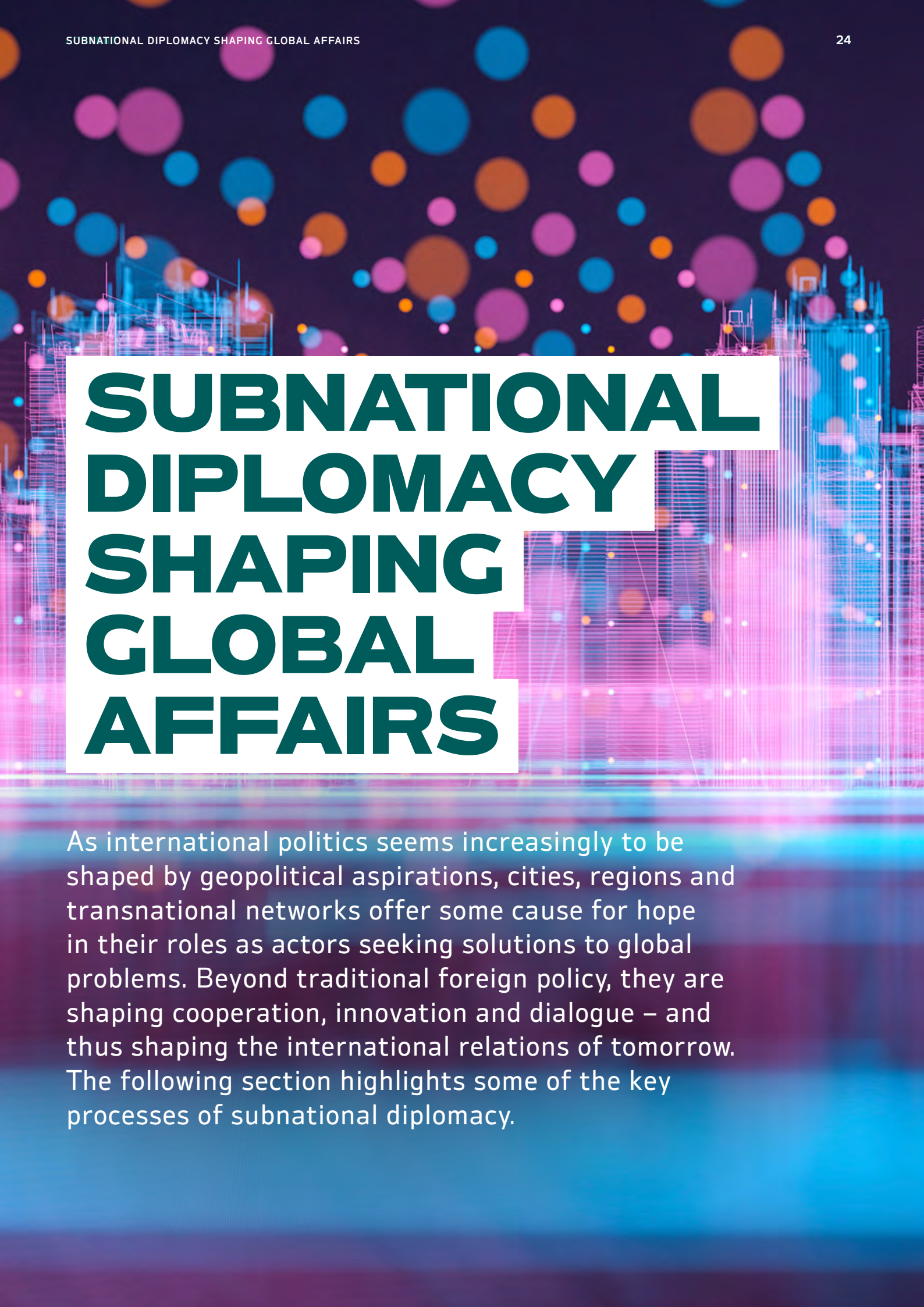
And it makes me proud that figures such as Elena Zhemkova, co-founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organisation Memorial from Russia, or the former President



of the European Court of Human Rights, Róbert Spanó, came to Bonn to discuss freedom of expression. This strengthens Bonn's standing on the international stage.

We live in fast-moving times. New dynamics and crises we hadn't anticipated are constantly emerging. My wish for the next five years – that the Academy will continue to keep its finger on the pulse, just as it has done so far. ■

Armin Laschet is Member of Parliament and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Bundestag. Laschet served as Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia between 2017 and 2021, and it was under his government that the Academy of International Affairs NRW was founded.

The background of the page is a vibrant, abstract composition. It features a dark purple base with numerous out-of-focus circles in shades of blue, orange, and pink, creating a bokeh effect. Overlaid on this are thin, glowing lines in blue and pink that form a complex, interconnected grid or network pattern, reminiscent of digital data or global connectivity. The overall aesthetic is modern and technological.

SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY SHAPING GLOBAL AFFAIRS

As international politics seems increasingly to be shaped by geopolitical aspirations, cities, regions and transnational networks offer some cause for hope in their roles as actors seeking solutions to global problems. Beyond traditional foreign policy, they are shaping cooperation, innovation and dialogue – and thus shaping the international relations of tomorrow. The following section highlights some of the key processes of subnational diplomacy.



Duisburg.

Subnational Diplomacy Between Speculations and Strength

A key component of subnational diplomacy is the role played by cities. This paper examines the role of the North Rhine-Westphalian city of Duisburg in German-Chinese relations against a backdrop of growing political tensions and failed projects. Despite increasing geopolitical pressure, it becomes clear that stable partnerships and local structures continue to facilitate international cooperation.

In late 2022, a well-known Western reporter on China put a pointed question to me: was Duisburg's role as Germany's 'China city' beginning to unravel, as China COSCO's withdrawal, the lapse of a Huawei agreement, and the city's much-publicized Chinatown 'branding exercise' had all 'ground to a halt'? The question not only reflected the immediate challenges facing Duisburg, exacerbated by the intense media spotlight, but also signaled deeper strains in China-Germany cooperation, revealing how shifts in the bilateral relationship were playing out in a highly visible local context.

Indeed, German cities find themselves in a double bind when it comes to partnering with Chinese municipalities. Through my interviews with municipal officials in North Rhine-Westphalia from 2022 to 2026, it became clear that cities face pressure from two directions. At home, they struggle with limited federal recognition of their international role, unclear guidance on China-related projects, and debates over responsibility and resources. Abroad, they must navigate a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape in which Germany's view of China has shifted dramatically. China is no longer primarily seen as a recipient of developmental aid; in the 2023 China Strategy, it is described as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. This triple role

leaves many municipal actors not only confused and uncertain but also exposed to additional political risks as they struggle to balance opportunities, regulatory pressures, and competing expectations in their engagements with Chinese counterparts.

Despite these challenges, however, German cities remain eager to cooperate. The interviews revealed that German municipalities proactively seek connections and that Chinese counterparts, recognizing this interest and motivated by substantial incentives to internationalize, frequently initiate partnerships. The resulting asymmetry, shaped by the challenges outlined above, puts German cities in an unusual position. While they are capable and motivated actors on the international stage, they find themselves having to improvise by developing informal and innovative strategies to sustain partnerships and navigate institutional and political constraints.

The city of Duisburg exemplifies these dynamics in practice. Although its partnership with China is not representative of German municipal engagement, it provides a case study through which the factors contributing to successful outcomes can be analyzed. Researchers have recognized its achievements and describe the Duisburg-China partnership as sustainable, resilient, and "all-weather." I further

argue that a combination of five factors enables the city to successfully navigate structural, geopolitical, and adverse mass media pressures.

The first factor is the establishment of a formal sister city partnership with Wuhan in 1982. This partnership holds significant symbolic value as it was the first sister city relationship between Germany and China. The partnership emphasizes continuity and reinforces the long-term commitment and trust that underpin Duisburg's international relationships.

The second factor is the relatively stable local political environment in Duisburg. Mayor Sören Link's long tenure reflects continuity in municipal leadership; he has led the city since 2012 and has been reelected multiple times. Furthermore, Duisburg's political history includes other long-serving figures, such as Josef Krings, who served as Lord Mayor from 1975 to 1997. This pattern of extended mayoral leadership is evident throughout the city's history. Local party control has alternated between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) over time. The SPD has often played a central role in shaping the city's international outreach. The Green Party, which generally takes a hardline stance on China-related issues, has traditionally held only minor representation in Duisburg. That stability has also been reinforced by the permanent position of Senior Advisor for China within the municipal government's international office. This position ensures continuity in policy and strategic focus in the city's engagement with Chinese partners.

The third factor contributing to the continuity of the partnership is the geographical location of Duisburg and its status as the largest inland port in Europe. Duisburg was designated the final destination of China's Belt and Road railway, with around thirty trains arriving from China each week. Although the number of trains has remained stable, the quality of service has improved. For instance, a train now reaches Duisburg from Xi'an in just ten days. Additionally, the railway has expanded to connect the EU with ASEAN countries. One of the interviewees explained to me that Duisburg also serves as a hub for European luxury goods transported by train from Italy to China, reflecting the city's growing role in high-value trade. Duisport, the city's major port authority, plays a central role in managing these logistics operations. This position is strengthened by the broader global shift toward railway transportation. These features provide the symbolic and material foundations that reinforce Duisburg's long-term engagement with Chinese partners.

The fourth factor is the well-established network of Chinese actors and institutions located in Duisburg, which has developed gradually over forty years of cooperation. Approximately 120 Chinese companies operate in the city, many of which are involved in rail freight and trade between China and Europe. Cultural and educational ties are also strong and include the Confucius Institute Metropolis Ruhr, regular student exchanges with schools in Wuhan, and Chinese language programmes at local schools, such as Max Planck Gymnasium and Landfermann Gymnasium. Chinese associations and business networks further support these connections, fostering a multifaceted ecosystem that strengthens long-term engagement and reinforces Duisburg's role as a hub for Sino-European exchange.

The fifth factor is the city's collaboration with local non-governmental organizations through cultural and educational initiatives that promote social cohesion and intercultural exchange. The city hosts the Chinesisches Frühlingsfest (Chinese New Year Gala) at the Mercatorhalle and the Drachenboot-Fun-Regatta (Dragon Boat Fun Regatta) at the Innenhafen. It also offers Chinese language and culture programmes through the Confucius Institute Metropolis Ruhr and the "Chinese Bridge – Hanyu Qiao" language competition for school-aged learners. These activities attract participants through genuine personal interests, such as sports, language learning, and cultural curiosity, rather

than being framed solely as "China events." These initiatives foster people-to-people connections, promote cross-cultural understanding, and encourage shared participation in the city's broader China-related engagement, complementing formal institutional and economic partnerships.

At the Chinese New Year Gala in Duisburg in January 2026, Mayor Sören Link and Chinese Consul Yu Yong described the Year of the Horse as a symbol of dynamism and forward progress, reflecting Duisburg's continued engagement with China. Following setbacks in 2022, including COSCO's withdrawal and the stalled Chinatown project, some began to question whether Duisburg had lost its significance in Sino-German relations. However, the city's sustained sister city relationship with Wuhan, political stability, strategic port role, robust Chinese networks, and meaningful community engagement suggest that Duisburg's economic connections and meaningful local relationships continue to prosper in 2026. Instead of a story of decline replicated in the mainstream media, Duisburg's experience demonstrates resilience and the lasting impact of everyday cross-cultural cooperation. ■



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Resilience and Frontsliding. European Capital of Democracy

Democracy is contested by authoritarian leaders. But there is hope at the subnational level. Cities engage in networks like the ECoD to foster alliances.

We are experiencing a global wave of autocratisation, defined as episodes that result in a sustained and substantial decline of democratic attributes such as freedom of the press, clean elections, rule of law, etc. According to the Varieties of Democracy Report almost three quarters of the global population live in autocracies, and the figures are rising. However, there is hope, especially if we do not focus on nation states but rather on the subnational level, that is to cities. Local leaders are stepping into the breach to protect, preserve and even strengthen democracy.

In response to growing political paralysis, ideological gridlock or illiberal practices at state levels, mayors have formed networks to support each other's efforts and maintain progress in important agendas like sustainable economic development, or public health, climate change mitigation and migration, to name but a few. They are also leading the charge on organising effective responses to abusive pre-emption efforts by repressive, illiberal governments. The most recent example is Minneapolis where the mayor and thousands of civic-minded citizens forced the Trump Administration's law and norm-breaking

anti-immigrant shock troops (ICE) to retreat. The best-known European examples are the four so-called Visegrád

capital cities, namely Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, as researchers Aron Buzogány and Tobias Spöri point out in their study on democratic resilience through urban resistance. Finding themselves in increasingly illiberal national contexts, the citizens of these capitals have elected progressive mayors who challenge national democratic backsliding locally by emphasising tolerance towards alternative lifestyles, environmental awareness, and open governance and responsiveness. Moreover, they share similar visions of civic participation, characterised by involving citizens in urban planning and public spending.

It is very important to note that these mayors and city administrations are not on their own, but form alliances. They engage in city diplomacy, learn from each other, and by doing so practice and roll out a Democracy Playbook to counter what Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt term the Authoritarian Playbook, referring to the dangers posed to democracy by politicians such as Donald Trump, Victor Orbán and other populist leaders.



TAMARA EHS is an AIA NRW Associate Fellow and a researcher and consultant for democratic innovations to safeguard democracy in Austria, Germany and at the EU level. She currently advises the Baden-Württemberg state government and the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA), acts as a country expert for the Varieties of Democracy Report, is on the ECoD's advisory board.

One of these alliances is the European Capital of Democracy (ECoD) initiative founded in 2019. Each year, a new capital of democracy is designated to act as a stage for innovation and best practice examples in strengthening democracy and head the network, with the Portuguese city of Cascais holding this title in 2026, and Brussels in 2027. Engagement in such alliances can protect cities from falling prey to autocrats who often use what Michael Mann calls the ‘Serengeti strategy’, whereby individuals (such as mayors, and by association the cities they govern) are targeted and subjected to huge pressure. However, it is much harder to single someone out who is backed by others.

One example of where being part of a network prevailed was Budapest in the spring of 2025: In March 2025, the Hungarian Parliament had voted in favour of a bill which banned holding or attending assemblies that violate the law on the protection of children, thereby forbidding the promotion or display of homosexuality. As a result, the Budapest Pride parade was banned. In response, the mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, organised the parade as a municipal event. He argued that a city event was not covered by the law on freedom of assembly. Although the Minister of Justice warned Karácsony that he would face one year of imprisonment, he still organised the parade, because European cities – mayors and citizens – stood together. First, Karácsony was invited to Vienna where he gave a speech at Vienna Pride saying, “If Pride can be banned in one EU member state, then no EU citizen is safe.” This was the starting point for a remarkable act of city diplomacy referring to European Union norms. Participants from 30 countries and around 70 Members of the European Parliament attended the Budapest parade in a show of pan-city and pan-European solidarity. The parade then became Hungary’s largest anti-government demonstration in years. Although the Public Prosecutor’s Office has filed charges against Karácsony with the aim of imposing a fine, it is most probably thanks to European solidarity and the significant pressure demonstrated by city diplomacy efforts that he is not facing either imprisonment or criminal trial.

Such brave acts of countering illiberal practices are part of a growing arm democracy preserving political science research. ‘Democratic resilience’ has emerged as a central concept. Studies identify party system characteristics, courts, civil society and political culture as factors that might strengthen resilience and aid societies in withstanding authoritarian tendencies. While most analysed factors were identified at a national level, there is increasing evidence that the subnational level can play a significant role in preventing democratic backsliding or opposing it if it does occur.

From the ancient Greek polis and proto-democratic structures of medieval city states to modern cities as hotbeds of mass democracy, cities have always played a central role in the history of democracy by harbouring institutions and organisations that support democratic governance such as the media, and civil society. This facilitates debates even in authoritarian states, where cities can become ‘pressure cookers’, as Robert Anthony and Edward Crenshaw put it.



The perspective of subnational diplomacy is therefore crucial when studying democratic resistance: mayors, city officials and administrators are actors in their own right and have agency and political clout. Moreover, it is exactly this level of governance that has so far received too little attention in the defence of European Union values.

Christophe Hillion et al.’s concept of ‘democratic frontsliding’ is most interesting in this context. It analyses what they call ‘restorative disobedience’ in the European Union, not only identifying markers of democratic resilience but also putting the focus on the future and how to restore liberal democracy in the face of competitive authoritarianism. ‘Democratic frontsliding’ is understood as the reversal of ‘democratic backsliding’ by reinstating a prior liberal democratic system of government, entailing the piecemeal reintroduction of democratic institutions and practices during or following a period of democratic erosion. Often found to be democratic enclaves amidst illiberal, authoritarian nation states, cities can often practice this concept to great effect. They are not only strongholds; their experience can also be drawn upon by the rest of the country. What scholars term ‘restorative disobedience’, as seen in Budapest, is a powerful recourse, where actions have a legal mandate, are proportionate, and are demonstrably designed to propel democratic frontsliding. Such legal mandate is not based on national law but rather refers explicitly to European Union legislation and the fundamental values of democracy and the rule of law as enshrined in Article 2 TEU. Not only are they seen as prerequisites for membership; indeed, Member States EU institutions are indeed dutybound to comply with in accordance with ECJ case law on the duty of non-regression. The Democracy Playbook is in the making. It is being written by brave cities that embrace democratic innovations and city diplomacy as a way to counter national governments’ illiberal authoritarianism. Networks like ECOD offer a platform to foster alliances. ■



Subnational Diplomacy. A New Hope for International Affairs?

As hosts of some of the Euro 2024 football matches, the North Rhine-Westphalian cities of Cologne, Dortmund, Gelsenkirchen and Düsseldorf played a major role not only in logistical preparations but also in representing a modern, friendly Germany to the international guests and spectators around the world. The usual small glitches aside, the atmosphere of a welcoming urban lifestyle in NRW, with the charming little differences between the venues in the Rhine and Ruhr regions, was instrumental in positioning Germany as a good host and showing its best face to the world. Mayors and experienced city diplomats even personally welcomed heads of states who had come to cheer on their national teams, evidencing how city diplomacy has become an integral part of international relations. The scope of international activities that cities in NRW have taken upon themselves has broadened considerably,

ranging from implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals to providing humanitarian aid in crisis regions like Ukraine or post-earthquake Turkey, and supporting projects to foster a lively democratic life here and abroad.

When the fellowship year 2025/26 kicked off, city diplomacy was already a frontrunner for the Academy's engagement with the focus topics of Translocalism and Subnational Diplomacy. The many visible networking activities of cities, the clear profile, for example, of Bonn as the German UN city, the participation of city diplomats in AIA events on a number of different topics, and the public debates about how cities can resist authoritarian tendencies, which became particularly pertinent after the re-election of Donald Trump in the US, were indicators that cities play an increasingly prominent role in international affairs.

The Summer Academy in June 2025 with the title Subnational Diplomacy – Shaping Global Affairs, organised in cooperation with the many experts that are part of the Academy's network, moved beyond the focus on cities. As the discussions of the Summer Academy showed, cities certainly are central to implementing global goals and, moreover, promoting innovative approaches to improve their inhabitants' lives. At the same time, other actors also have now also emerged on the international political stage. Particularly in the context of the European Union, some regions have become power houses of economic development, whereas others try to learn by engaging with regions in neighbouring countries that face similar challenges such as post-industrial development or environmental degradation. Furthermore, cross-border cooperation can be translocal, for instance between non-state actors such as religious or tribal groups, which can contribute to a relaxation of conflictual bilateral relations, as in the cases of India-Pakistan or in the case of Nigeria. The examples evidence the potential for using subnational diplomacy as a tool for conflict transformation.



Mutual learning between cities and regions in post-industrial areas, both with regard to fostering economic growth and countering anti-democratic tendencies, was another key debate across several research colloquia, events and publications. Budapest's role as a liberal opponent of a less liberal Hungarian government was discussed during the Summer Academy; representatives of several US cities reported about the challenges they faced from a growing political divide under the Trump administration; and several mayors of the US delegation and the mayor of the Belgian city of Charleroi addressed citizens' feelings of fatigue and hopelessness in post-industrial regions during the Summer Academy, a topic that was picked up on again at events in Dortmund and Bonn, albeit with a focus on the overlapping challenges facing cities in the Ruhr and in countries with authoritarian governments. The different debates underlined how crucial it is to acknowledge the highly interlinked nature of local, national and even global politics.

A series of workshops and expert meetings in Bonn and Brussels highlighted the potential of regions and other subnational entities. AIA fellow Stuart MacDonald's research explored the subnational actors' capabilities in creating and capitalising on soft power resources such as specific regional food specialities or historic achievements. In the different debates during several meetings around soft power of states or regions, North Rhine-Westphalia, with its impressive economic and cultural potential, was seen by most as a prime candidate to further develop its existing soft power resources such as its European and global networks or new cooperation initiatives with interesting partners.

The systematic insights gained from the many discussions around research colloquia, AIA Discussion Papers and Policy Briefs, field work in NRW and China, and outreach and transfer activities largely confirmed the potential of subnational processes to be an important addition or even temporary replacement for at times strained official, state-level diplomacy. In an increasingly complex global environment, new actors such as cities and city networks are emerging and may help to re-focus attention on urgent and complex problems that can be felt and need to be solved on the local level. ■



The Academy for International Affairs also hosted a number of other events throughout the fellowship year with a view to exploring the different aspects of subnational diplomacy in more depth. Cities in NRW featured centrally in a project concerning Sino-German relations, with AIA fellow Anna Shpakovskaya conducting interviews both in larger and medium-sized municipalities, which brought to light the lack of orientation regarding intensifying or disengaging from relations with China. Meetings and discussions with representatives of city clusters in China, including such mega cities as Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai, shed light on Chinese city officials' rationalities in seeking bilateral agreements with international partners, which largely have domestic reasons such as pressure from the central government to engage in such activities.

PARLIAMENTARY MEETING AT THE LANDTAG NRW:

America's Turn to Authoritarianism

We were honoured to attend an NRW-USA parliamentary group meeting at the State Parliament in Düsseldorf, where together with AIA fellow John Austin we discussed structural change in the US 'heartlands' and in North Rhine-Westphalia. Despite all the challenges, it became clear just how important it is to strengthen the transatlantic partnership.

PANEL DISCUSSION:

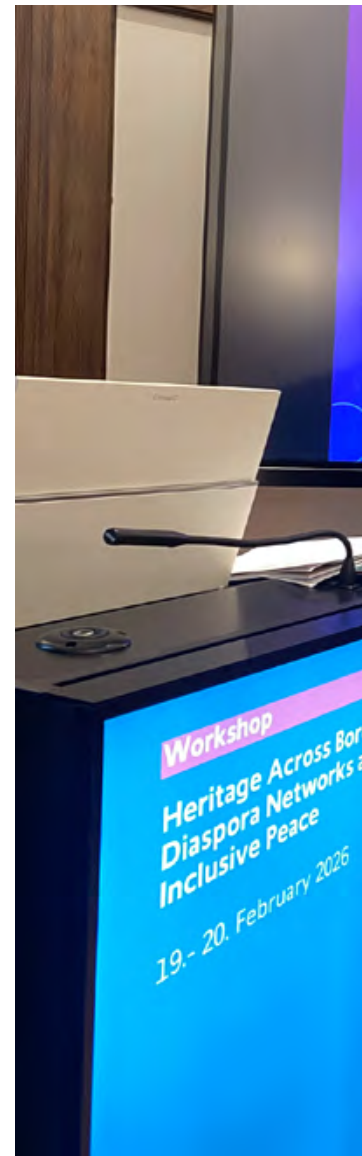
Autocracy On the Rise – Can Cities Save Democracy?

Cities are key players in strengthening democracy, but must not be overburdened. Our discussion at the "Haus der Bildung" in Bonn clearly demonstrated how important networks and civic engagement are in this regard. Conclusion: It is not cities that save democracy, but citizens.

WORKSHOP IN BRUSSELS:

European Regions and the Future of Europe's Soft Power

We brought together renowned experts from various countries and sectors at an event at the NRW State Representation in Brussels to explore European regions' potential in exercising soft power. Participants agreed that the central problem is a lack of coordination; harnessing regional potential and focussing on diplomacy are essential.



PANEL DISCUSSION: Together in Transition. Lessons from the Ruhr Region and the Rust Belt

The Ruhr and the Rust Belt – our event in Dortmund, organised in cooperation with the Amerikahaus NRW, demonstrated that there is more to renewal than just the economy – it also needs identity, innovation and participation.

FELLOW WORKSHOP: Heritage Across Borders: Translocal Diaspora Networks and Pathways to Inclusive Peace

This workshop, organised by AIA Fellows Summar Barbar and Ifedayo Malachi, focused on diaspora and transnational groups as key actors in peacebuilding. Case studies from Asia, Africa and Europe illustrated how mobility, networks and identity foster new forms of cooperation.

WEBINAR: Brazilian Paradiplomacy: Historical Trajectories, Institutions, and Case Studies

Together with the Paradiplomacy Scholars Forum, AIA Fellow Débora Prado initiated a webinar on Brazilian paradiplomacy, during which Brazil's significance in foreign policy, the economy and climate policy was discussed.



City Diplomacy in NRW.

Three Cities, Three Questions, Three Answers

As part of our focus on sub-national diplomacy, we have been in regular contact with various city diplomacy managers from North Rhine-Westphalia. Here, three of them—from **Dortmund, Düsseldorf, and Duisburg**—share insights into their increasingly important work.





Dortmund

What role do cities play as actors in sub-national diplomacy in the 21st century, and how has this role changed compared to the past?

Ayan Huseynova, Dortmund:

Sub-national or more specifically urban diplomacy has evolved from symbolic bilateral sister city ties focused on culture and reconciliation to a much broader scope. It encompasses bilateral/multilateral exchanges and thematic project-based work, staff and youth capacity building, amplifying municipal voices through strategic participation in multi-level governance processes like Urban7, UNECE Forum of Mayors, LGMA Constituency etc. Dortmund defines urban diplomacy as an innovation driver securing prosperity, economic collaboration, rule of law, democracy, and peace. For us it is a pragmatic, agile tool tackling local manifestations of global challenges like climate crises, migration, implementation of sustainable development goals, combatting disinformation and hybrid threats through partnerships, expert exchanges, advocacy, and funding access.

Theresa Reymann, Düsseldorf:

Cities have become central actors in sub-national diplomacy in the 21st century. While city diplomacy in the past was largely symbolic—focused on sister city partnerships and cultural exchanges for students or church groups—it is now far more strategic and policy-oriented. Cities act as pragmatic problem-solvers, cooperating across borders on climate action, economic resilience, migration, and democratic governance. As the closest levels of government to citizens, cities can react faster, test solutions, and maintain dialogue even when national relations are strained. Networks of cities now complement, and sometimes compensate for, traditional state diplomacy.

Heike Maus and Mika Ache, Duisburg:

The role of city twinning links has changed – or rather developed – significantly over the last century. International exchange has evolved between the administrations, organisations and institutions of cities, by shifting from a merely bilateral to a multilateral communication. Duisburg's twinning link with Portsmouth, England, is a prime example because it developed from a post-war symbol of friendship and reconciliation to a mutually beneficial alliance. Thus, the original idea of twinning links resulted in soft power influence with "hard" outcomes like reciprocal economic benefits. Through this, cities have become the international agents for national values and know-how. Duisburg, for example, maintains communication channels even in times of crisis through its solidarity twinning with the Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih.



Ayan Huseynova is Urban Diplomacy Officer at the City of **Dortmund**.

*Düsseldorf*

What would you consider to be the biggest challenge in your work as a city diplomacy manager?

Ayan Huseynova, Dortmund:

Dortmund

Urban diplomacy activities do not fall under legally mandatory tasks of the city administration. So, our biggest challenge is continually proving to our own city administrators and politicians that it is essential – not an add-on, but a catalyst for solving local challenges and advancing global priorities. National and state governments must also recognize cities' hands-on, solution-driven role in international relations beyond state ties. The path forward is greater local involvement in national processes to leverage untapped expertise, improve citizen access to foreign policy, and strengthen federal-state-municipal cooperation, with cities bridging gaps in areas such as climate, migration, economic collaboration, sustainability, and democracy.

Theresa Reymann, Düsseldorf:

Düsseldorf

The biggest challenge in my work as an International Affairs Manager is balancing strategic ambition with limited resources and political or administrative constraints. International cooperation is traditionally not one of the core responsibilities for a city and must deliver tangible local benefits in order to stay relevant. Yet its results are often long-term and difficult to quantify. At the same time, international work is increasingly shaped by geopolitical tensions, requiring careful coordination, political sensitivity, and constant justification of why global engagement matters at the municipal level.

Heike Maus and Mika Ache, Duisburg:

Duisburg

The hardest part is generating and sustaining support. Urban diplomacy is a voluntary effort by the city, which has to be financed internally. Due to financial constraints and limited manpower, it has become increasingly hard to warrant international projects. As alluded to earlier, symbolic acts are not a sufficient justification anymore for the city to allocate resources. We are heavily dependent on external funds and voluntary support – i.e. intercultural speakers, clubs, etc. Both are becoming increasingly difficult to find due to budget restraints at a state and national level and the ageing population within voluntary organisations.



Theresa Reymann
is Senior Project
Manager in the Office
for International and
European Affairs
of the state capital
Düsseldorf.



Duisburg

Can you give us a specific example from your work that could serve as a best case or model for other cities?

Ayan Huseynova, Dortmund:

A prime example from Dortmund's international portfolio are our North American partnerships, exemplified by longstanding ties with US cities like Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Oklahoma City as well as collaborations in science, business, and culture that persist despite national political shifts. These enable pragmatic exchanges on climate protection, digitalization, economy, social participation, and diversity. With our entry into the Global Innopolis Network Initiative alongside Seattle and Montgomery County and most recently Québec, we are advancing innovation and smart tech solutions. This resilient, multi-level cooperation model (via bilateral/multilateral frameworks) strengthens our transatlantic bond and offers other cities a blueprint for mutual learning and joint responses to global challenges. Furthermore, with the "America Year" announced in Dortmund in 2026, we are underlining the importance of transatlantic bridges, especially in times when democracy is under threat.

Dortmund



Theresa Reymann, Düsseldorf:

A strong example from my work is the strategic development of Düsseldorf's cooperation with its Ukrainian partner city, Chernivtsi. Established as an official sister city relationship shortly after the beginning of Russia's invasion, the cooperation has evolved steadily from primarily humanitarian assistance—mainly through donations—into a structured municipal partnership. Today, it includes expert exchanges and targeted technical support, which together have enabled the acquisition of more than €1 million in funding and grants from different institutions over the course of three years.

Düsseldorf



Heike Maus and Mika Ache are part of the Protocol and International Relations Team in the Mayor's Office of **Duisburg**.

Heike Maus and Mika Ache, Duisburg:

There are multiple successful projects and cooperations with our twinning links and solidarity partners. We take it as a special success if we are able to provide tangible help in times of crisis and hardship; thus, we are very proud of our project with the Turkish city of Gaziantep. In collaboration with our Dutch project partners, we were able to support the construction of a new and fully-equipped day care centre in Gaziantep in the earthquake-stricken region in eastern Turkey. That way, we as a city were able to contribute restoring normal life in our twin city. This project was successfully implemented on a municipal level with the involvement of many stakeholders, both private and public.

Duisburg

Subnational Governments and Climate Governance Challenges

The international action of subnational governments (cities, regions, provinces, and federal states) is not a recent phenomenon, but it gained greater prominence in the 1980s with the rise of the concept of paradiplomacy, referring to their engagement in international affairs.



FELLOW

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While traditionally focused on trade, investment, regional integration, decentralized cooperation, and cultural diplomacy, the field has shifted toward the climate agenda since 2000. This evolution reinforces 'climate federalism' and highlights the role of subnational entities in global climate action. Urban areas host 45% of the world's population, and two-thirds of global population growth by 2050 will occur in cities. This creates major challenges; cities are central to both emissions and climate risks. Achieving Paris Agreement goals thus depends on subnational entities implementing infrastructure, mobility, and social justice policies focused on both mitigation and adaptation.

Beyond its title as the 'COP of Implementation,' COP30 aimed to consolidate itself as the 'COP of Cities,' reinforcing climate federalism and the strategic role of subnational governments. Represented by the LGMA Constituency (Local Governments and Municipal Authorities Constituency) with ICLEI's support, subnational governments advocated for increased urban climate finance. Their primary demands also included a permanent UNFCCC subnational forum and the integration of urbanization and multilevel governance as operational pillars within UNFCCC decisions and National Adaptation Plans.

The pursuit of greater institutionalization within the UNFCCC, through the creation of a permanent forum at the COPs, would expand the capacity of subnational entities to participate both in formulating proposals and in monitoring decisions adopted by member states. In turn, making the Ministerial Dialogue on Urbanization and Climate Change a permanent and mandatory item on the UNFCCC agenda, and embedding it in National Adaptation Plans, would create a formal space for member states to report on how cities and regions are being integrated into Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs). While the final Mutirão text lauded



subnational climate efforts, it stopped short of formalizing a permanent, mandatory dialogue within the UNFCCC.

Financing remains a critical deadlock. Despite the approval of the Belém Action Mechanism and the Belém Package (which sets global guidance to triple climate finance by 2035), these measures notably lacked any direct reference to the role of subnational entities.

Initiatives to strengthen multilevel governance: the role of Brazil and Germany

Parallel to the official Belém package, the urban and multilevel governance agenda advanced through voluntary adherence to the COP30 Climate Action Agenda. A key milestone under Axis 4 (Resilient Cities) was the Plan for Accelerating Solutions (PAS) on Multilevel Governance, which aligns NDCs with subnational action. Supported by CHAMP (Coalition for High Ambition Multilevel Partnership for Climate Action), co-chaired by Brazil and Germany, the initiative aims to integrate multilevel governance into 100 countries' NDCs by 2028 and 120 by 2030 (COP30 Action Agenda Outcomes Report, 2025).

Inter-federative dialogue and multilevel governance structures differ significantly between the two nations, with Germany serving as a benchmark (CHAMP Summary Activities, 2024). The 1949 Constitution recognizes the Federal States' rights to be consulted on the conclusion of treaties affecting the regions and allows them, within the scope of their legislative powers and with the consent of the federal government, to conclude international agreements. This federal structure grants the states substantial autonomy, further bolstered by their direct institutional recognition and participation in European Union decision-making.

In Brazil, the debate on the decentralization of powers and cooperation among federal entities gained momentum

with re-democratization and the 1988 Federal Constitution, which established a federative model with shared responsibilities among the federal government, states, and municipalities.

Under Lula's administration, the COP30 presidency fostered a political climate for deeper subnational engagement and strengthened intergovernmental coordination. This shift was solidified at COP29 (2024) with an updated NDC that explicitly commits to climate federalism across all levels of government (Brazil's NDC, 2024). However, subnational entities still lack formal coordination spaces with the federal government. Coordination occurs in a more decentralized manner through ministerial actions, particularly those of the Ministries of Cities and the Environment, posing significant challenges to the implementation of multilevel governance in the country.

As CHAMP co-chairs until 2027, Brazil and Germany share the goal of expanding multilevel governance by fostering institutional and informal spaces that enable subnational governments to participate in the design and implementation of NDCs. In both cases, beyond expanding the role of subnational entities in NDCs, it will be crucial to demonstrate verifiable results. This includes identifying how many countries have effectively incorporated multilevel governance structures, how these arrangements function (in terms of competencies, financing, and monitoring), and what concrete impacts they have produced on adaptation, mitigation, and access to resources. From the perspective of multilevel governance, a key challenge will be to translate the experiences of countries that already have institutionalized instruments and capacities for cooperation with subnational governments into dissemination and support mechanisms that can be replicated across different federal contexts. ■

The NRW-USA Parliamentary Friendship Group as a Bridge Builder

INTERVIEW with **Angela Freimuth**

The USA has been one of Germany's most important allies since the Second World War. Over the decades, a large number of political and personal networks have also developed at sub-national level. One example of this is the NRW-USA parliamentary friendship group of the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament. We spoke to the chair of this group, **Angela Freimuth**, about its work at a time when transatlantic relations have come under strain at national level.

Why did you decide to take on the chairmanship of this group?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: It was mainly for personal reasons. I have family in the United States and had the opportunity to travel there and get to know the country as a child and teenager. Those were formative experiences for me. Even after completing my studies, I continued to travel to the country and got to know its diversity. In 2000, I was elected to the state parliament. At that time, there was no parliamentary friendship group. I received an invitation from the U.S. State Department to participate in the International Visitor Programme – in retrospect, that was my entry into political America. In 2001, shortly after 9/11, I spent four weeks in the United States. In 2002, I attended the Annual Summit of the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver, Colorado. These trips soon led to the idea of establishing a friendship group here in North Rhine-Westphalia.

How long has the group been in existence and in what context was it founded?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: The idea was brought up independently by my colleague Rolf Seel and me. We both wrote to the President of the State Parliament of our own initiative and presented our idea. That provided the impetus for the group's founding in 2004. After the 2005 state election we continued our work.

What connects the undoubtedly very diverse members of the group? Is it solidarity with the USA and a fascination with the country?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: In fact, there are many different motivations within our group. Some, like me, have family connections; others have been fascinated since a school exchange or have studied in the U.S., and some are just interested in transatlantic relations. In this respect, there

“Since the group consists of colleagues from all political parties, it is important to first create an atmosphere of openness and a safe space for discussion.”

Angela Freimuth

is no single motive, but everyone has their own different perspectives. Since the group consists of colleagues from all political parties, it is important to first create an atmosphere of openness and a safe space for discussion.

What are the group’s specific activities and how does it work?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: We regularly organize meetings with political analysts, scientists, and U.S. experts as well as delegation trips. We work closely with partners here in North Rhine-Westphalia, with the U.S. consulate, the Amerikahaus (“America House”), as well as with American clubs and universities. For example, if there is interest in exchanging ideas with members of parliament who are interested in transatlantic issues, we try to facilitate that. Ideas for topics and initiatives often come up spontaneously within the group.

In your view, what connects North Rhine-Westphalia and the USA?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: Often, it is personal or family ties that have the strongest binding force – and, of course, trade, business, and collaboration in research and science. The approaches are very different. Former Minister-President Armin Laschet and Nathanael Liminski, currently Minister for Federal, European and International Affairs, contributed significantly to raising U.S.-NRW relations to a new level, a trajectory which our current Minister-President Hendrik Wüst is continuing. The NRW–USA Year, a firm commitment in the 2022–2027 coalition agreement, has also significantly helped us in our work, enabling us to make greater use of dialogue opportunities at the state level, especially when things are a little more challenging at the national level.

What are perhaps the most prominent distinctions between the USA and NRW today?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: You know, when you’ve been doing this as long as I have, not everything seems as new as it is sometimes portrayed. To be honest, issues such as our contribution to NATO were already on the table during the



Obama administration, and the demands for us to contribute to defense policy are nothing new.

How important are town twinning arrangements as part of sub-national diplomacy for your work?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: Town twinning is very important, although it can sometimes be a little difficult to coordinate, as every mayor tends to take their own approach. However, we are increasingly trying to focus on town twinning. We also try to provide support if there are specific questions, including between colleagues. Most of the time, it’s about whether there is any support or funding available for something, or about opening channels of communication with members of the state parliament or members of the state government. When delegations visit from partner countries, some of them are highly prominent. In any case, the legislature holds a completely different status there. We also have that status in our constitution, but our American colleagues have a much greater sense of self-confidence.

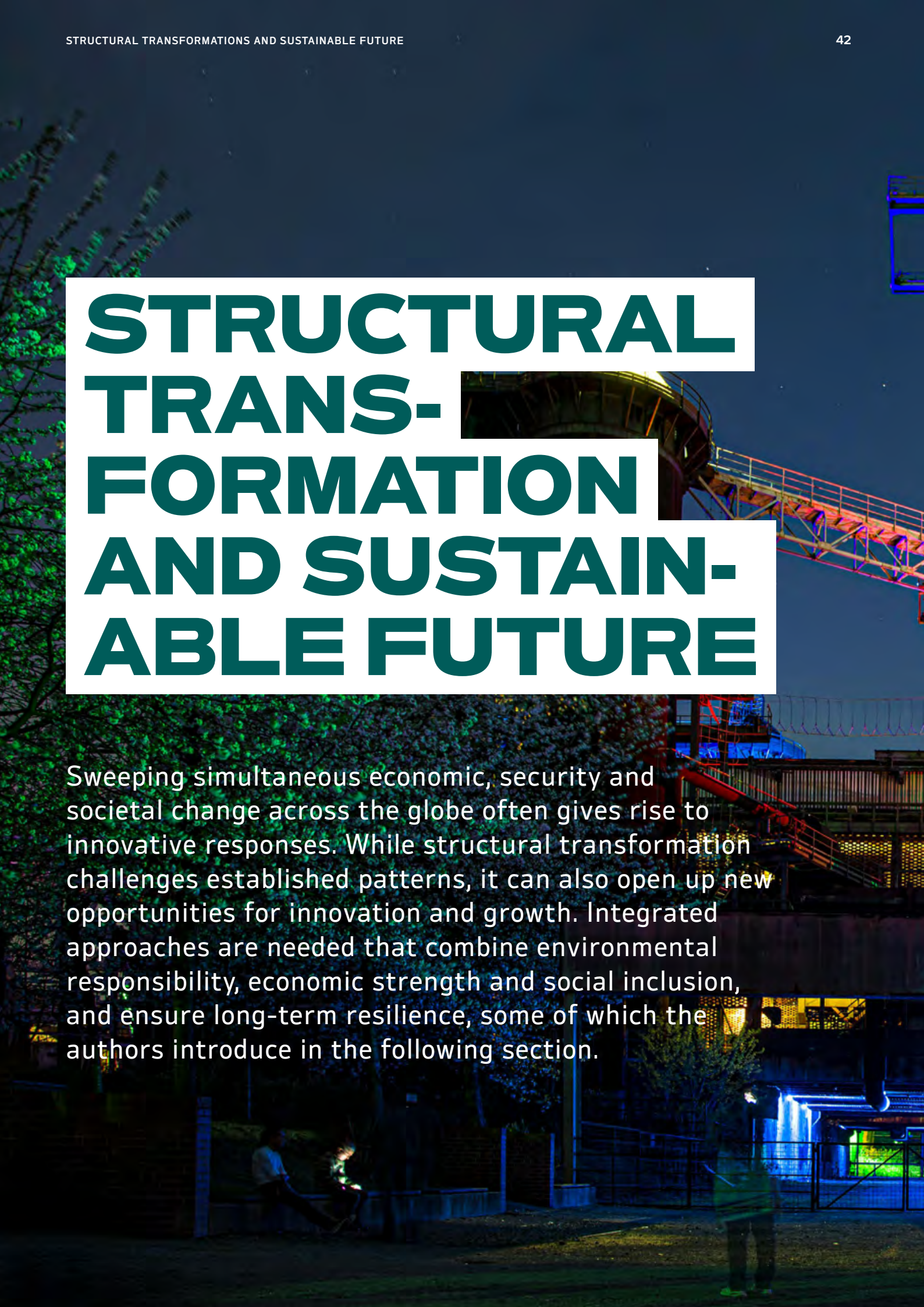
What are your most important issues and next major initiatives at the moment?

ANGELA FREIMUTH: Right now, we are primarily focused on the national security strategy and will certainly be organizing an event on that topic. At least one more delegation trip is also planned. After that, we will already be approaching the end of the legislative session, and the U.S. midterm elections will be coming up. The focus here will clearly be on the election campaigns, and our work within the group will take a back seat.

Thank you very much for talking to us! ■



Angela Freimuth (FDP) has been a member of the State Parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia since 2000, and served as its Vice President 2005–2012 and 2017 to 2022. During the current legislative session, she serves as chair of the NRW–USA Parliamentary Friendship Group.



STRUCTURAL TRANS- FORMATION AND SUSTAIN- ABLE FUTURE

Sweeping simultaneous economic, security and societal change across the globe often gives rise to innovative responses. While structural transformation challenges established patterns, it can also open up new opportunities for innovation and growth. Integrated approaches are needed that combine environmental responsibility, economic strength and social inclusion, and ensure long-term resilience, some of which the authors introduce in the following section.



Together in Transition.

Lessons from the Ruhr to Rust Belt

Once-mighty industrial regions in US, Germany, and across democracies can rise again—sharing notes and strategy for effective transformation.

The US Rust Belt mirrors a similar European geography, with a similar arc of development—national industrial rise, fall, and now a tenuous rebirth:

Germany's Ruhr. Both find their politics threatened by dynamics of decline and alienation which, if neglected, will continue to shape geopolitics—and not for the better. However, within the developmental arcs are lessons on how to foster policies and practices for effective economic transformation. A look at two similar industrial regions—Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Germany's Ruhr—provides insight for shaping economic opportunity and cohesive politics.

Rustbelts emerged as densely populated areas during the first and second industrial revolutions. They experienced rapid population growth driven by coal extraction and heavy manufacturing. Since the 1970s, forces such as globalized trade and the move to a knowledge and service economy have restructured whole industries, shifting capital and populations to regions outside of industrial heartlands.

Residents of rustbelt regions—their attitudes and voting behaviors—have a disproportionate impact on the stability of Western democracies. Declining economic opportunity and increased geographic inequality are fertile soil for demagogues peddling nostalgia and nationalism to resurrect their communities. Attitudes and voting patterns in these regions threaten to steer democ-

racies into isolationist, ethnonationalist camps.

The US Midwest and German transitioning regions occupy center-stage in the battle for whether strong, healthy

democracies will prevail or degenerate into anti-democratic, isolationist power blocs. A recent report argued that “support for ethnonationalist leaders is driven by voters' economic insecurity and anxiety about social change.” People experiencing disruption and decline are more susceptible to political movements promising simple answers to complex problems.

Despite this, much can be learned on both sides of the Atlantic about how to navigate deindustrialization toward economic regeneration and political cohesion. Pittsburgh and the Ruhr were the centers of their respective coal and steel industries. Both faced economic crises as steel, coal, and related industries collapsed, shedding hundreds of thousands of jobs. Yet both regions have transformed their economies, diversifying their signature industries and growing their service sectors; today they

are widely viewed as industrial regeneration success stories. They followed different paths, with different outcomes of economic growth, social stability, and political complexion.

Absent any meaningful national or state strategy for aiding regions undergoing structural economic change, Pittsburgh's efforts were by necessity driven by entrepre-



FELLOW

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neurial local stakeholders from— government, business, universities, and philanthropists. These public-private partners had first come together in the 1950s to form the Allegheny Conference, a regional economic development leadership organization initially focused on environmental cleanup after years of heavy industry and downtown redevelopment. Over time the partnership was the catalyst for several waves of community strategic planning, leveraging universities, financing research centers and office parks for emerging sectors and building a robust, more diverse, economy based on supercomputing, robotics, software engineering, and advanced medical technologies and treatments. These centers became magnets for federal research funding and the locus of additional public-private partnerships, innovation, tech development, and startups. This has led to repopulation and significant business growth in the urban core of Pittsburgh—but it has not uplifted mill towns outside the city.

In contrast, the Ruhr transformed its economy and softened the blow of deindustrialization with top-down financing and planning from the NRW and federal governments, and the European Union. These bodies invested hundreds of billions of euros focused on: (1) Subsidizing the Ruhr's coal industry and offering welfare support and transitional aid for miners; (2) Designing and implementing numerous rounds of structural adjustment policy investing in the Ruhr's infrastructure, education and research institutions, and environment; (3) Environmental remediation and the greening of the region's community and economy.

While the Ruhr's approach eased the pain of restructuring, particularly for the dislocated workers, it did not create a higher-wage, tech-driven economy like Pittsburgh. The faster transition to a knowledge-based service economy resulted in stronger GDP per capita in Pittsburgh. In contrast, GDP in the Ruhr has consistently fallen below the German average.

These contrasting approaches to industrial restructuring and economic growth have led to differences in each region's politics. Pittsburgh remains a Democratic bastion girded by its diverse, educated population; in contrast, its outer-lying communities have become some of the strongest Republican areas in the US. The failure to extend economic opportunity beyond the city allowed populists to offer nostalgia and scapegoats for the decline. Nevertheless, the Ruhr's politics remain moderate—the Social Democrats have won a plurality in every federal election since reunification, with the Christian Democratic Union consistently coming in second and the right-wing AfD party gaining steam in a few hardest-hit places.

The different experiences and strategies for regeneration



pursued by these two regions demonstrate the importance of transatlantic exchanges of practice. Pittsburgh illustrates how it is possible to nurture a high-tech economy from industrial bones, but at the cost of exacerbating regional economic divides, yielding a more polarized polity. The Ruhr reveals how to modulate the economic and social effects of deindustrialization and deter the rise of populism, but has not been as successful at nurturing new jobs and growth in highly valued sectors. The best of both worlds would combine these two approaches.

The democratic challenges facing Western nations are crises of performance, not belief. They reflect uneven adaptation to global change—integration without inclusion, growth without reassurance. The widening gap between thriving centers and struggling regions has weakened confidence in democratic institutions—but has not extinguished it. Most residents still prefer reform to rupture; they want governments that listen and perform. ■



Wisconsin native **Emily Adams** is a former German Chancellor Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).



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Post-Socialist Social Policies. Old Ideas Are Coming Back

In 1989/1991, the rapid collapse of most Marxist-Leninist governments across the Eastern Bloc saw the end of Soviet-style socialism. Or so the common view holds. Yet my field research on contemporary social policies in this region suggests that many socialist-era ideas have silently returned.



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The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a new beginning for Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, Russia and Central Asia. The transition to (some) liberal democracy and market economy inevitably affected welfare models, including social policies which are government-sponsored programmes and services that aim at improving people's wellbeing.

Until then, social services had been available on a universal basis, according to one's needs and regardless of income. In practice, however, waiting times could be long, and the quality often left much to be desired. In the early 1990s, these universalist social policies were dismantled. Financially, states in the region could not maintain the same social spending while undergoing systemic transformations and facing an economic crisis. Ideologically, in the zeitgeist of that period many policies were substituted with Western-inspired alternatives. Under the pressure of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, socialist social policies were replaced by a new, one-size-fits all neoliberal model. Despite country-specific differences, the common principle implied the state's withdrawal from welfare provision and at least some degree of privatisation of social services.

Across the wider post-socialist region, the trends were similar. New social policy approaches were driven by the ethics of self-reliance and self-empowerment. Much of the state support became means-based, limiting it to the poorest social groups. In public discourses, these communities were often ostracised for their own dire condition. In the context of progressing neoliberalisation in public and private spheres, the more people were able to spend on social services out of own pocket, the better quality of care they were entitled to obtain. Those who had to rely on state support were considered losers, incapable of adapting to the new reality.

What I believe constitutes one of the most striking features of contemporary social policies in the region is that, against all odds, socialist-era ideas have started to come back. Over the last decade, several old solutions have been "injected" into current policy frameworks, albeit without challenging their overall architecture. To a greater or lesser extent, governments, policy advisers and civil society groups in the region continue to reject their

countries' socialist past. At the same time, they revisit the repertoire of socialist-era policies and pick out ideas as they see fit. This process sees old rationalities of these ideas being strategically reframed in a nationalist and future-oriented manner. In a region where the past remains a sensitive topic, this discursive manoeuvre can be used to avoid being publicly accused of socialist nostalgia.

To illustrate this trend, I will provide illustrations from my fieldwork research in two countries in the post-socialist region, namely Tajikistan in Central Asia and Poland in Eastern Europe. The first case concerns the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In Soviet Tajikistan, the testing and treatment of vast groups of the population who were considered to be particularly at risk of STDs, such as people travelling abroad and their entire social circles, was mandatory. These policies clearly valorised public health over individual human rights, and the policy was often implemented with the involvement of law enforcement bodies. In the 1990s, as Tajikistan was undergoing a civil war after the Soviet collapse, governance was largely outsourced to international organisations. In this process, UNAIDS, Global Fund and similar actors fully redesigned Soviet STD policies. The prevention of STDs started to rely entirely on voluntary testing. That approach also narrowed down the definition of populations at risk to some key social groups, such as sex workers and injection drug users. However, by the mid-2010s the government of Tajikistan realised that these policies were not effective at curbing the numbers of STDs. As infection numbers continued to rise, and especially as an increased number of children were born with HIV, the Tajik government reverted to the Soviet healthcare repertoire. Introducing mass-scale mandatory testing was not an option in view of international human rights treaties that the country ratified; nevertheless, several laws were introduced that obliged people to present an HIV test to obtain certain state services. For example, in 2016 the government introduced a mandatory medical checkup, including testing for HIV and other STDs, of future spouses, making it a requirement to register marriage. This new method was officially framed as a measure securing the "future of the nation" (ояндаи миллат) by protecting the health of future pregnant women and children. While nonetheless criticised by international actors for breaching individual rights and freedoms, the statistics suggest that these policies contributed to improving diagnostics and treatment.

The second example is the Polish family policy developed under the national-conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) government (2015-2023). In the face of drastically declining birth rates and a looming demographic crisis, family policy became this government's flagship initiative. In the 1990s and 2000s, regardless of right- or left-wing orientation of previous governments, family policy was characterised by austerity: meagre parental leave, inexistent or largely privatised childcare infrastructure and cash benefits available only for the poorest. The PiS government literally reset the system. It introduced monthly child benefits ("500+"), family care capital, housing support, holiday



coupons, tax exemption for large families, extended paid maternity leave and improved access to childcare services. Paradoxically, while the PiS government positioned itself as extremely critical towards Poland's socialist past, its family policy solutions resembled socialist-era policies from the 1970s and 1980s. Discursively, the PiS government also echoed the socialist narratives, arguing that family policy should have a universal character and aim at supporting women in combining the roles of mothers and workers. Like in Tajikistan, these policy initiatives were stripped of their historical background and reframed in a nationalist manner, under the banner of a "good change" (dobra zmiana) for the "Polish family" (polska rodzina).

One of the key reasons for this unexpected return of socialist-era social policy ideas, dismissed in the early 1990s, is the disillusionment with neoliberalism, the effects of which are becoming increasingly visible. But incorporating socialist ideas into contemporary policy frameworks requires some rebranding. This is because across the region, the socialist history either has not yet been reworked for its good and bad sides, like in Tajikistan, or was categorically denounced without any elaboration, like in Poland. In this context, reframing old policies in a nationalist way brings legitimacy both to these policies and those implementing them.

In summary, socialist ideas might be coming back, but they do not challenge the deeply neoliberal post-socialist welfare systems. ■

EU Regulatory vs. South Korean Developmental Hydrogen Policy Leadership

Hydrogen strategies diverge: the EU regulates while Korea leads in tech. These two distinct models are compared to reveal how non-superpowers try to reshape global influence through green leadership ambition.

The global energy transition has matured from a quest for lower emissions into a comprehensive era of structural transformation. As countries and regions raise their climate ambitions, they are fundamentally retooling their industrial bases, replacing fossil dependencies with green industrial policies that prioritize technological sovereignty and long-term resilience. Hydrogen is the linchpin of this metamorphosis. As both a high-density fuel and industrial feedstock, hydrogen can decarbonize “hard-to-abate” sectors like steel where batteries cannot supply sufficient power. This versatility is reconfiguring global value chains, shifting industrial power toward green energy hubs and fundamentally redrawing the international trade map.

The divergence in global hydrogen policies stems from a complex interplay of domestic capacities and strategic imperatives following recent geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts. Thus, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Countries face unique constraints, including varying renewable energy potential, freshwater availability, and existing infrastructure for storage and export. Beyond physical resources, a state’s economic status, industrial capacity, and social acceptance levels dictate its policy direction. Ultimately, these strategies are deeply rooted in specific state-business relations, making each country’s path toward a green economy distinct and context-dependent.

As the EU and South Korea navigate their unique structural transformations, their hydrogen targets reveal distinct pathways toward a green economy. The European Union (EU) has positioned itself as a regulatory architect and production hub, aiming to produce 10 million tonnes of renewable hydrogen domestically while importing an equal amount by 2030 to decarbonize its heavy industrial clusters. Conversely, South Korea is focusing on its comparative advantage in utilization and technology leadership. Its roadmap prioritizes the expansion of hydrogen-powered mobility and stationary fuel cells, seeking to secure a dominant position in the global high-tech value chain.

The development of hydrogen policy in the EU and South Korea reflects a fundamental distinction between regulatory and developmental styles of green industrial policy. The EU has traditionally operated as a “regulatory state,” emphasizing market liberalism, rulemaking, and the establishment of neoliberal governance paradigms to steer the energy transition. In contrast, South Korea follows an East Asian “developmental state” tradition, where the government actively intervenes in the economy to guide the pace of development and support the local assimilation of new technologies. While both regions have accelerated their hydrogen strategies through Green New Deals, their institutional frameworks dictate how these policies are integrated across sectors.



A key divergence lies in their respective approaches to policy integration: the EU utilizes a horizontal approach, whereas South Korea relies on a vertical approach. Under the European Green Deal, the European Commission acts as a central authority to horizontally connect strategic hydrogen agendas across climate and energy domains at both the Union and Member State levels. Conversely, South Korea's hydrogen policy is vertically managed by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE), which leads the national industrial and market development through a state-business-research network. Interestingly, the K-Green New Deal had a limited impact on horizontal integration, as South Korea's strong industrial tradition meant hydrogen remained primarily within the industrial and energy policy arena rather than penetrating broader environmental agendas.

The strategic focus and policy frames of each region further highlight these different industrial styles. The EU's regulatory framework prioritizes "renewable hydrogen" produced via wind and solar power, aiming to install 40 GW of electrolyzers by 2030 to decarbonize heavy industrial clusters. South Korea's developmental strategy focuses on utilization, specifically leading the global market in fuel cell electric vehicles (FCEVs) and stationary fuel cells to secure a technological edge in the global value chain. While South Korea emphasizes economic development and regulatory revolution to foster new business entries, the EU focuses on creating a liquid, well-functioning regulatory framework for a trans-border hydrogen market.

There is substantial potential for the EU and South Korea to jointly refine their green industrial approaches by learning from each other's unique governance strengths. The EU can gain insights from South Korea's effective vertical policy integration and its robust state-business-research networks. Specifically, South Korea's early prioritization of hydrogen safety management and regulatory innovation offers a model for addressing public concerns that the EU has struggled with due to perceived democratic deficits in its regulatory governance. Conversely, South Korea can learn from the EU's success in horizontal policy integration, where the European Green Deal serves as a high-level political engine that connects climate, energy, and industrial domains across various sectors. This horizontal approach helps prevent the siloed ministerial management often seen in the Korean context, where hydrogen agendas can become trapped within industrial policy arenas and fail to penetrate broader environmental and social agendas.

Regarding hydrogen diplomacy and international cooperation, both actors must move beyond high-level strategy to ensure coherence at the implementation level. Furthermore, future cooperation must prioritize the international dimension of hydrogen policy, specifically focusing on building resilient supply chains and diversifying energy sources to mitigate geopolitical risks. Finally, these green industrial approaches must be sustainable and effective. It is essential for both to enhance public participation in their governance structures to improve social acceptance and ensure that the energy transition addresses broader societal goals beyond economic competitiveness. ■



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The Kids are Alright.

Young People and Soft Power

Diving into the position of young people in international relations as inconspicuous but important soft power tools.

Often thought of as inconspicuous powerhouses, young people are increasingly being viewed less as helpless, emotional, inexperienced or objects of concern. Rather, they have agency and are empowered to effectively navigate and effect change in various aspects. Young people are considered to be the most populous demographic, accounting for over 4 billion people. Hence their meaningful participation in international affairs is rather necessary as they straddle their existence in both the present and future of the world. Their influence is crucial in the global agenda and in international relations, they are effectively deployed to align with soft power tools.

This has been seen more with scholarship and exchange programmes. Erasmus, Chevening, Commonwealth Scholarship, US pioneered Young African/South Asian Leaders Initiative and Rotary Youth Exchange are a few of the most coveted opportunities for young people to live in new countries and immerse themselves in different cultures, often presenting many instances to share, question, negotiate and challenge perspectives. In the long run, these experiences result in networks and partnerships amongst students, young people, institutions and countries which can shape various policies. These networks often evolve into channels of cooperation that inform diplomatic engagement and influence development priorities. Those who complete such programmes return home with a unique mindset based on conversations and lived experiences, ready to effect change

in their home countries. In addition, for these programmes to even take place, many institutions across the different countries must remain in good stead with each other. This

includes foreign ministries, embassies and universities that need to trust other systems. These arrangements signal political goodwill. Where relations deteriorate, mobility agreements are often among the first areas to be restricted. In this way, youth mobility in education is both a product of healthy diplomatic relations and a mechanism that reinforces them.

Similar notions are held for sports. There are many youth games and tournaments held globally such as the FIFA U20 World Cup, Commonwealth Youth Games, Youth Olympic Games, World Junior Championships and others across a plethora of disciplines that invite the most promising talents to compete as well as put their country on the map. The role that sportsmanship and athlete etiquette has in projecting narratives of integrity and resilience of a country that each athlete represents can not go unnoticed. This may even be one of the reasons why many countries heavily lobby to host such global tournaments. Moreover,

nations that consistently nurture young talent tend to be viewed as demonstrating investment in human capital and national aspiration, which are quite desirable values to be attached to a nation. A well hosted youth tournament can easily translate into hosting the bigger tournaments, thus signalling a countries' cultural openness, political stability and competence.



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Popular culture offers another channel through which youth exercise soft power. The global spread of Korean pop music and television dramas demonstrates how culture and entertainment can transform a country's international image. Many of these K-pop idols are young and their music caters to a youthful demographic. Despite the language barriers, they have dominated global media and shifted perspectives of Korea towards being an equal rival to long-established Western media due to the polished aesthetic and clean content. Aside from the entertainment industry, we have seen these K-pop idols selected as UN Goodwill Ambassadors, thus taking on a rather significant responsibility of raising awareness of different causes amongst young people and beyond as a result of their fan following. A parallel phenomenon occurred within Africa with the rise of Nollywood as well as Afrobeats and Amapi-ano from Nigeria and South Africa respectively. It is largely young people who produce the content, consuming it at scale and circulating it through digital platforms, thereby acting as the primary drivers and amplifiers of cultural influence within the international space.

Notably, there have been cases where young people have been centred in movements that have not stemmed from entertainment, sports, educational or cultural contexts but that still exhibit traits of soft power. The Fridays for Future initiative within the climate change movement is a very compelling example. It has predominantly been organised, led and implemented by young people with amazing impact. This global network of young people has piled a lot of pressure on governments to the point that some governments have had no choice but to align themselves to their demands. As a result, states cultivate the image of being more progressive and adaptable to tackling emerging issues simply by acknowledging young people's movements. Importantly, youth soft power is often inconspicuous. In most cases, it unfolds through everyday interactions, online exchanges and media consumption rather than officially. Yet these micro-level engagements accumulate over time. When millions of young people adopt foreign cultural references or travel for the sake of education, they contribute to a more interconnected international society than any government could dream of. This social fabric can either

mitigate or intensify geopolitical tensions depending on how it is nurtured. It is a powerful position young people have found themselves in, consciously or not. In turn, it is therefore also the responsibility of governments to actively pursue the creation of such pathways, ensuring that young people are present across the board, also finding resonance at a global level. The rewards for a state are far-reaching and long-lasting. ■



NEW PATHS FOR GLOBAL COOPERATION AND SECURITY

Alternative and new ways of thinking and fresh perspectives often emerge as a counterweight to institutional inertia and a return to power politics. Innovative approaches to cooperation, security and governance are attempts to tackle feelings of general hopelessness amid technological upheavals, shifting alliances and fundamental global challenges. We hope that the perspectives presented in this section will inspire you.



A Changing World Order.

Europe's Strategic Role Frontier

IN CONVERSATION

Mayssoun Zein Al Din in conversation
with **Christoph Heusgen**

With a calm yet firm demeanor, diplomatic experience at the highest levels of international affairs, and a clear-eyed view of the geopolitical challenges of our time, **Christoph Heusgen** is one of Germany's most prominent foreign policy figures. As a longtime advisor to Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations, he has witnessed and helped shape crises, conflicts, and historic turning points firsthand. In this conversation, he offers insights into current developments in security policy, Europe's role in a changing world order, and the lessons that can be drawn from recent years of international diplomacy.



Mr. Heusgen, we are currently witnessing a dramatic escalation in the Middle East, with direct military attacks by the US and Israel on Iran. In your view, is this just another regional conflict, or a turning point in international order?
This escalation is not “the” turning point in international order. But it is part of a worrying trend characterized by a declining respect for international law.

Have these attacks shifted the threshold of what is considered a legitimate means of international politics?

I am appalled that the clear conditions for military intervention, as prescribed by the United Nations Charter, are now being relativized even in Germany.

You have experienced many crises – how do you assess the current developments in a historical context? Is it comparable to 2003, or does it go beyond that?

The current situation goes beyond 2003, because in addition to the war in Iran, Russia is continuing its aggression against Ukraine, and the People’s Republic of China is continuing to pursue its expansionist policies in the South

China Sea and toward Taiwan in the wake of these wars.

If one draws this parallel, has the West—especially the US—actually learned from the experiences of the 2003 Iraq War?

Apparently not.

The West regularly emphasizes rules-based international order. How credible is this narrative now, when key actors themselves are taking military action without a clear basis in international law?

We are currently experiencing the greatest crisis of international order based on the United Nations Charter.

Do you already see this as a potential precedent that could give other actors room to maneuver?

It’s too early to say. I’m counting on the international community to come to its senses after all. There are also countervailing trends, such as the “Global Initiative,” the campaign inspired by the International Committee of the Red Cross to strengthen international humanitarian law.



What role do China and Russia play in this crisis—as observers, beneficiaries, or potential mediators?

Both countries want a new legal order. An order in which individual human rights no longer play a role, but only state sovereignty—which applies primarily to themselves, not to unwelcome smaller neighboring states. Both countries currently sense an opportunity.

What global consequences do you anticipate? Could the conflict in the Middle East lead to greater bloc formation in the world?

No, it will lead to greater disorder. By needlessly jeopardizing its decades-long role as a guarantor of peace and prosperity, and now being unable to fulfill that role, the US will diminish its influence. The situation will become more complex.

Europe often speaks of “strategic autonomy.” In the current crisis, however, it appears largely reactive. Does Europe lack strategic and moral independence?

Under European leadership, the Iranian nuclear program was brought under control in 2015. This was a shining moment for European diplomacy. The agreement even held for another year after President Trump unilaterally withdrew from it during his first term. Europe should not despair, but rather consistently continue on the path that made the EU great after the Second World War: creating peace and prosperity through negotiations and building trust on the basis of the rule of law.

In your opinion, is Europe too dependent on US security policy decisions?

It definitely is.

If Europe is to develop more independence, what do you see as Europe’s central task today?

There are many! The EU is doing excellent work by concluding numerous free trade agreements. This makes it economically more independent from the protectionists China and the USA. Progress is also being made in the defense sector. The greatest challenge lies internally: it is the nationalist, Eurosceptic forces on our continent that want to destroy the European peace project.

How can Europe give new impetus to the European project?

Through successes: in the economy, by tackling new challenges such as AI and social media, and through perceived reductions in bureaucracy.

Germany is often perceived internationally as hesitant. Is this reticence still sustainable given the current global situation?

No. As the world’s third-largest economy, Germany must take a stand and demonstrate leadership. Who else is going to do it?

Should Germany take a clearer position, even if this is initially inconvenient in terms of foreign policy?

Yes. Hesitation ultimately benefits no one.



“As the world’s third-largest economy, Germany must take a stand and demonstrate leadership. Who else is going to do it?”

Christoph Heusgen

How can Germany assume a constructive leadership role within Europe?

We must return to Europe’s golden age, when de Gaulle and Adenauer, Helmut Schmidt and Giscard d’Estaing, Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand, took Europe’s destiny into their own hands. This Franco-German leadership is missing.

You have experienced international crises firsthand for decades. Does your concern about the current global situation outweigh your confidence in politicians’ ability to act?

I have never been as worried as I am today. It seems to me as if the lessons of the past have been lost.

Which lesson from your diplomatic experience seems particularly important to you right now?

A return to the power of the rule of law. We must not resign ourselves to accepting the rule of might makes right. The EU is the prototype of a union of states built on the rule of law. It is essential to preserve and strengthen it. ■



Christoph Heusgen looks back at a career of more than 40 years as a diplomat, having served in Bonn, Chicago, Paris, Brussels, Berlin and New York. His postings included Deputy Head of the Private Office of German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel, Director of the EU’s first High Representative Javier Solana’s Policy Unit, Chancellor Merkel’s Diplomatic

Advisor (2005 to 2017) and Germany’s Ambassador to the United Nations (2017 to 2021). He chaired the Security Council in April 2019 and July 2020. Christoph Heusgen is a graduate of the University of St. Gallen where he received his PhD and where he taught Political Science. He chaired the Munich Security Conference between 2022 and 2025.

Germany and Namibia. The Past in the Present

The process of coming to terms with German colonial crimes in Namibia continues to give rise to political, legal and social conflicts. How can a Culture of Remembrance and contemporary politics appropriately address the colonial past?

It is not widely known that imperial Germany was the fourth biggest colonial power at the beginning of the 20th century. Between 1904 and 1908, German soldiers committed genocide among indigenous communities in the settler colony then known as „German South West Africa“, now the sovereign state of Namibia since 1990. An estimated 70 to 80 percent of the Ovaherero and one third to half of the Nama (plus a substantial number of Damara and San) did not survive that extermination strategy. In 2015, the German government admitted that what happened then was a genocide “from today’s perspective”.

Such a caveat resorts to the principle of inter-temporality to avoid any legal obligation for reparations. It argues that norms established later are not applicable, and that as a consequence, mass violence with the intent to destroy can only be deemed to be genocide if committed after the Genocide Convention was adopted in 1948. Despite such (dis)qualification, official German policy recognises without reservation that the monstrosity of the Holocaust, but also the extermination of the Armenians, constitute genocide. Many Namibians perceive such a contradictory flaw to be a double standard bordering on racism.

Notwithstanding this inconsistency, no other colonial power has yet admitted their colonial mass atrocities to a similar extent. The German and Namibian governments entering into direct negotiations in 2015 with a view to coming to terms with this shared history was no less exemplary.

However, the inter-temporal caveat was a kind of safety belt: it avoided opening a Pandora’s box by excluding any far-reaching precedence that would set a legal reference for other cases, be it for Germany or other colonial powers. To avoid any risk, Germany did not apologise for the atrocities. Rather, the issuance of an official apology is one element of the negotiations, during which the German side insisted that the term reparations (Wiedergutmachung) were not to be used.

“Anything about us, without us, is against us.”

A Joint Declaration was initiated by the special envoys in May 2021 and was expected to be officially adopted within weeks by the two Foreign Ministers. That did not happen. Negotiations have been ongoing since then. The contentious issues are the avoidance of the term reparations, the caveat

regarding the use of the term genocide, and the amount agreed as compensation: 1.05 billion Euro allocated to development projects in the regions in which the descendants of the indigenous communities most affected by the genocide live, plus 50 million Euro for cultural cooperation activities. The Namibian government also objects to the document stating that upon its adoption a final line (Schlussstrich) will be drawn under the colonial chapter. In the debate following her State of the Nation Address in April 2026, the Namibian Head of State Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah declared that progress had been made and that a modified version could be adopted before the end of the year.

Even if both governments should adopt the Joint Declaration, however, domestic Namibian problems, which to



some extent result from the genocide committed, will remain unsolved. After all, the effects of 30 years of German colonial rule in the territory, lasting from 1884 to World War I, endured long beyond that era. Not only did the decimation of the directly affected indigenous communities who resisted colonial rule have lasting demographic consequences on Namibia's socio-cultural and political realities; German colonial rule also created continued socio-economic marginalisation. The land of the defeated was appropriated and the survivors were forced to live in ethnically defined ("tribal") "native reserves". Regulations restricted mobility and imposed strict racial/racist segregation. They would go on to serve as a blueprint for the South African model. Apartheid was made in Germany.

Meanwhile, the appropriated land has never been returned. To date, almost half of the territory is private property used for commercial agriculture, trophy hunting, and for other tourist purposes such as guest lodges. About 70 percent of this land remains in White ownership, and many of the farmers are German speakers. For the descendants of those robbed of their land, it is a daily reminder that colonialism is not in the past. Despite being affected most by German colonialism, they have not been directly involved in intra-governmental negotiations. Their most important representative bodies, such as the Ovaherero Traditional Authority and the Nama Traditional Leaders Association, therefore reject these with the slogan "Anything about us, without us, is against us". This refers to a substantive clause in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Adopted by the General Assembly with the votes of both countries in 2007, Article 18 states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures." Irrespective of their outcome, without the direct participation of the affected indigenous peoples, these negotiations cannot put the matter to rest.

The same is true of the current official German Culture of Remembrance. In its coalition agreement of December 2021, the government of SPD, the Greens and FDP declared that reconciliation with Namibia was an indispensable task of historic and moral responsibility. In 2024, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media tried to add colonialism to the Culture of Remembrance



Framework Concept (Rahmenkonzept Erinnerungskultur) alongside the Nazi regime and the GDR. A fourth pillar on migration was also suggested, but since the official Culture of Remembrance is focussed exclusively on injustices for which the state is responsible, the proposal failed. A final effort to rescue the colonial dimension by deleting migration came too late, as the coalition had by then collapsed.

In its coalition agreement of May 2025, the government of CDU/CSU and SPD dedicates three sentences to colonialism. There is no specific mention of Namibia. A pledge is made to create a dignified place of remembrance of the colonial past, but no mention is found of this under memorials or elsewhere in the document. Such an initiative would fall under the remit of Wolfram Weimer, appointed as Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. His new state remembrance concept omits colonialism. Such an omission is tantamount to memory failure. ■



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Belonging Rules.

Governing Identity in Multi-Ethnic Society

In Nigeria, clashes between Fulani herders and farming communities reflect deeper disputes over belonging, mobility, and land rights. These conflicts stem from competing ethnic and legal claims shaping access to resources and protection. Aligning identity, law, and livelihoods through shared frameworks and local reconciliation can help reduce violence.

CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE

In Nigeria's Middle Belt, particularly Benue State and neighbouring parts of Nasarawa and Plateau, the farmer-herder conflict connects groups with distinct livelihoods and land traditions. Fulani pastoralists depend on seasonal cattle mobility along established migration corridors that sustain Nigeria's livestock supply. Tiv and Agatu communities, predominantly sedentary farmers, ground land rights in ancestral occupation and lineage systems: what appears as "unused land" may be inherited family territory tied to graves, shrines, and collective memory. Thus, the same cattle route may be seen as an ancestral Fulani migration path, Tiv or Agatu lineage land, or state property designated for investors. These are not merely competing land claims but competing registers of belonging, frameworks that define who counts as an insider with legitimate rights. When these registers collide, disputes over access shift from negotiation to confrontation.

Belonging is reinforced daily through origin stories, festivals, religious networks, and increasingly through WhatsApp and vernacular radio. It is formalised through documents such as indigene certificates, voter cards, and land titles. When rhetoric hardens or rumours spread, neighbours can be re-labelled as "strangers," transforming shared spaces into exclusionary zones and intensifying insecurity both for farmers and herders. Conventional security approaches treat violence as scarcity-driven and identities as fixed. Yet field evidence from North-Central Nigeria shows that scarcity is often activated through belonging-work, through narratives and administrative acts that redefine legitimacy.

When shared understandings of belonging collapse, land and livestock become weaponised symbols of exclusion rather than shared economic resources.

CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS: EVERYDAY CODES DRIVING CONFLICT

Farmer-herder violence in Nigeria is driven by three everyday codes of belonging that structure who can access land, grazing routes, and markets.

1. Ethnic Register: First-come myths collide with Fulani mobility ethics. Farmer elders invoke origin stories as land titles, whereas Fulani leaders emphasise attachment to grass rather than borders. Ethnicity is strategically activated: youth shift their ethnic and religious identities to access state or NGO resources. This fluidity helps explain why 78% of farmers, including Tiv and Agatu, even those born outside the local area, label Fulani herders as "strangers," while 64% of Fulani herders in turn describe farmers as "land-grabbers," transforming routine interactions into high-risk encounters.

2. Occupational Register: Production defines worth, yet systems clash. Farmers present land titles and permanent crops; herders show cattle brands and mobile livestock. Overlapping land use hardens boundaries, raising economic stakes: median crop loss is \$2,280 (8 months' income), milk sales collapse by 82%, and herders double night guards, increasing labour costs by 28%.

3. Autochthony Register: Paper often overrides memory: indigene certificates, land titles, and other official documents outweigh ancestral presence in determining who counts as “native.” Locally born Fulani without documentation are deemed “foreign,” while returnee farmers reclaim land through family IDs or lineage rights. These legal asymmetries reinforce violence, as seen in criminal accountability: only 4 of 47 Fulani homicide suspects were charged, compared with 31 of 38 Agatu suspects. In this environment, multi-positional belonging emerges as actors navigate overlapping and situational codes of identity and access.

The Spatial and Social Impacts: When the codes clashed, disputes escalated with 32 villages being razed; 60,000 displaced; herders trek 40km extra, food prices surging far beyond conflict zones, raising livestock stress and methane output. Ruins serve as mnemonic anchors for grievance and revenge.

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

Belonging is performed, not fixed. Conventional tools that assume stable identity groups overlook the dynamics driving scarcity and violence. Interventions must re-code belonging rather than merely promote coexistence through:

1. Co-title Corridor Deeds

Establish multi-stakeholder boards (farmers, herders, youth, women) registered with the National Boundary Commission and the National Land Management Council; renew signatures each planting season to formalise shared access. Provide technical support from the Surveyor-General of Nigeria and the National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) for drone mapping, with legal templates vetted by the Nigerian Bar Association. Link updates to state land bureaus and the ECOWAS Early-Warning System.

2. Sensory Reparation Rituals

Support joint well-cleansing, communal meals with “enemy water,” and role-swap story circles through the Victims Support Fund, Presidential Peace-Building Fund, and National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). Monitor psychosocial impacts through women’s religious associations across Nigeria, with results reported to the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) for evaluation.

3. Mobile Mixed Courts (MMCs)

Rotate tri-sector panels of state judges, traditional rulers, youth leaders, and women representatives between herder camps and farming villages every six weeks. Apply statutory sunset clauses voiding judgments after 12 months to prevent rigid “stranger” vs. “native” distinctions. Fund portable court kits (tents, solar recorders, biometric registers). Enforce rulings through High Court warrants combined with local peace-task-forces trained by the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR).



4. Women-Only Micro-Fees

Legislate \$0.035 USD (3.5 cents) per cow/day corridor-maintenance levies collected by state revenue boards and managed by women-only cooperatives/associations. Allocate funds to corridor repairs, milk-chilling facilities, and girls’ education, thereby giving women direct economic and governance stakes in peace.

5. Belonging Governance in Security Planning

Mandate the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) and state security councils to track processual identity codes alongside rainfall and livestock data. Integrate the ECOWAS Early-Warning System and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) rural incident logs into the National Counter-Terrorism Centre dashboard. Trigger interventions such as joint deed renewals and sensory rituals when thresholds shift, preventing escalation before violence occurs.

WHO TRULY COUNTS AS AN ‘INSIDER’?

In Nigeria’s multi-ethnic society, land, water, and identity often collide, turning everyday life into a battlefield of belonging. The evidence shows that violence isn’t simply about scarcity, and it is far from inevitable. The real question is: who truly counts as an “insider”? By rethinking land rights, embedding inclusive justice, and repairing social ties, communities can turn flashpoints into bridges, making belonging a force for peace rather than a spark for war. ■



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Soft Power in an Age of Rupture. What the Evidence Tells Us

As great powers retreat from multilateralism, new research reveals which strategies actually work for nations seeking influence through attraction.

“We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition.”

Mark Carney’s address to the World Economic Forum in Davos this January captured a shift that policymakers can no longer ignore. The rules-based international order, he argued, no longer functions as advertised. Great powers increasingly use economic integration as coercion, tariffs as leverage, and supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited. In this environment, middle powers face a stark choice: compete with each other for favour or combine to create a third path. Carney’s prescription, of what Finnish President Alexander Stubb has termed “value-based realism”, rests on building “a dense web of connections across trade, investment, culture” that can provide resilience and influence in a fragmented world. “We shouldn’t allow the rise of hard power to blind us to the fact that the power of legitimacy, integrity and rules will remain strong,” he argued, “if we choose to wield them together.” But which approaches to building such connections actually work? A major new comparative study offers some evidence-based answers.

The research, conducted by Stuart MacDonald (AIA-Fellow and Director of ICR Research), for the British Council between June and September 2025, examined soft power strategies across 25 jurisdictions using a new Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes framework. This approach systematically links what countries possess in terms of cultural, educational and scientific resources to how they deploy

these assets internationally, and ultimately to the measurable results they achieve. The framework treats soft power as a production process, enabling direct comparison of how effectively different nations convert their cultural and educational endowments into international influence. Quantitative indicators were triangulated with qualitative case studies to identify not merely which countries perform well, but why their approaches succeed or fail. Drawing on fifteen validated international indices and AI-enhanced methodology for data synthesis and multilingual analysis, the study provides the most comprehensive assessment of soft power effectiveness to date, and its findings speak directly to the challenges Carney identified.

The headline finding challenges assumptions that soft power success requires massive spending. Germany emerges as the most efficient performer, not because it outspends competitors but because its tripartite institutional structure (linking the Goethe-Institut, DAAD and GIZ) achieves close alignment between strategic objectives, institutional mandates and programme delivery. This integrated approach generates substantial impact through institutional specialisation whilst maintaining strategic coherence. For middle powers with constrained resources, this demonstrates that smart coordination can substitute for scale.

The research also documents the dramatic retrenchment now reshaping the competitive landscape. The United States has significantly reduced its public diplomacy infrastructure following the establishment of the Department of Government Efficiency, with USAID ceasing operations as a standalone agency and Voice of America staff placed on administrative leave. Simultaneously, China has contracted its Confucius Institute network by 54 per cent (from 990 to 459 locations) following international pressure over academic freedom concerns. These simultaneous contractions by major powers create precisely the opportunities and challenges that Carney’s “variable geometry” approach is designed to address.

South Korea illustrates an alternative pathway. The Korean Wave demonstrates how commercial cultural industries can multiply soft power impact through market mechanisms, creating powerful synergies between private-sector success and public diplomacy. Korean language learners globally increased from approximately 12 million in 2020 to over 17 million by 2024, an extraordinary growth rate achieved largely through cultural attraction, driven primarily by the global success of K-pop groups such as BTS and Blackpink, and internationally acclaimed television dramas distributed through streaming platforms, rather than institutional infrastructure. This suggests that governments need not bear the entire burden of soft power projection; strategic alignment with private-sector cultural success can achieve remarkable results.



The study identifies several patterns with direct implications for coalition-building. Resource-constrained countries achieve better outcomes through focused regional engagement, such as the Nordic countries' concentrated presence in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, or Australia's prioritised investment across the Indo-Pacific, rather than globally dispersed presence. Countries effectively integrating digital strategies achieve substantially lower per-capita costs than those relying on traditional physical infrastructure, though success depends on sustained content creation and cultural understanding across target markets.

Long-term investment in scholarship programmes creates expanding networks of influence as alumni advance in their careers. Approximately 60 per cent of current heads of government globally possess some form of UK educational experience, whilst Germany's DAAD programmes demonstrate that 78 per cent of alumni maintain active professional connections five or more years after their programmes conclude. These networks represent precisely the durable relationships that underpin effective coalition-building.

Perhaps most significantly for middle powers navigating the current rupture, the research demonstrates that outcomes reflect institutional quality and authenticity rather than resource magnitude. The efficiency matrix reveals that additional spending yields diminishing returns once core institutions are established. Scale alone cannot guarantee greater soft power impact: strategic focus and credibility matter more than sheer volume of investment.

In a world where great powers can afford to do it alone but middle powers cannot, understanding what actually generates international influence becomes strategically essential. The evidence suggests that nations achieving soft power success combine clear priorities with institutional coherence and sustained political commitment. For countries seeking to build the cultural and educational connections that provide the foundation for value-based foreign policy, these findings offer both reassurance and practical guidance. ■



FELLOW

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Relations Matter. China's Balance of Relationships Approach to Multilateralism

Whether Beijing has articulated a coherent approach to international affairs and a viable plan for shaping international order, and how such a plan may evolve, has long concerned scholars of international relations (IR) and policymakers alike. In response to external skepticism, Chinese leaders have emphasized the uniqueness of China's historical and social conditions. A frequently cited example is Xi Jinping's 2013 speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, in which he remarked that "only the wearer knows whether the shoe fits," highlighting the limits of applying Western historical experience and theoretical frameworks to China's rise. Yet despite such claims, much of the IR literature continues to struggle to specify how a post-rise China may actually reshape the international order.

In the absence of analytical clarity, assessments of China's intentions and behavior often drift toward worst-case assumptions. This tendency can obscure the diversity and contingency of China's possible trajectories while reinforcing threat perceptions that make the international system appear more uncertain and potentially more dangerous. China's engagement with Central Asia offers a useful illustration. Beijing institutionalized its ties with the region through the China–Central Asia C5+1 mechanism in 2020 and went on to establish the first permanent physical Secretariat in 2024. Rather than assuming a deliberate effort to overturn the existing order, this case raises a more measured ques-

tion: how should China's expanding institutional presence in Central Asia be understood, and what does it realistically mean for regional order and great power competition?

This article argues that to better understand China's

views on international order, it might be helpful to assess how China has designed and managed multilateral settings. In addition, the theory of Balance of Relationships (BoR), argued in the following sections, offers a more suitable and practically useful framework for the abovementioned purpose. Rather than emerging from abstract theorizing, BoR is grounded in empirical observations of China's conduct in international politics since 1949. Unlike mainstream IR theories, BoR does not assume that an anarchic international system consistently pushes states toward self-help. Instead, it highlights patterns of self-restraint and the central role of bilateral relationships, especially among non-Western countries, in managing interstate interactions. From this perspective, China's behavior on the global stage can be understood as being guided by relational thinking, as theorized by the BoR.

China's design and practices of non-rule-based multilateralism

The Central Asia China Secretariat, inaugurated in March 2024 in Xi'an, represents a notable step in the institutionalization of the China Central Asia C5+1 mechanism. Importantly, the design of China's C5+1 builds on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (the SCO) established in 2001, and its



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organizational structure and operating style largely follow earlier practices. The Secretariat is tasked with implementing summit-level agreements and coordinating cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, and infrastructure. Its location in Xi'an, a symbolic starting point of the Silk Road, further underscores China's preference for embedding regional engagement within durable and familiar institutional forms.

Like other multilateral settings initiated by China, the SCO is an international organization characterized not by universal rules but by loose and flexible principles. Since its inception, it has emphasized respect for sovereignty and formal equality among members, principles inherited from earlier regional diplomacy. Although the SCO regularly conducts joint counterterrorism exercises, these do not constitute a military alliance. Instead, it functions as a partnership framework that prioritizes flexibility and connectivity over opposition to a defined adversary. In practice, the organization rests on a dense web of bilateral ties. This structure enables China to pursue regional stability while reinforcing its central position within multilateral settings it has helped create, especially during disagreements.

The relational thinking behind the scene: BoR and Chinese multilateralism

BoR posits that relational stability can outweigh short-term material gains because it underpins long-term strategic interests. States may therefore exercise restraint or make concessions to preserve bilateral ties, treating stability of relations as an end in itself. China's 1960s concessions to Myanmar and its 1979 war with Vietnam exemplify this logic. How a state evaluates a relationship depends on historical interactions, domestic political culture, shared values, and situational constraints. Unlike theories that focus primarily on material or structural considerations, BoR emphasizes that relational thinking can guide rational decision-making even when it involves forgoing visible, immediate benefits. This does not imply that BoR is pacifist. BoR holds that states may use force to punish perceived relational disruption and restore balance, reflecting strategic rationality rooted in long-term relationship management.

Building on the earlier discussion of China's relational logic in bilateral ties, BoR offers a framework for understanding how states can manage international uncertainty through self-restraint rather than pure self-interest. BoR defines state behavior as the process of establishing and maintaining mutual obligations, prioritizing relational security over immediate material gains. By exercising self-re-



straint, states can clarify intentions, stabilize relationships, and safeguard long-term interests, even in an anarchic environment. This focus on bilateral and flexible relational strategies makes BoR particularly suited to analyzing China's diplomacy, where long-term relationships are deliberately managed to secure strategic objectives.

A similar logic applies to China's approach to multilateralism. In frameworks such as the SCO or the China-Central Asia C5+1 mechanism, stabilizing bilateral ties and maintaining connectivity often matter more than achieving clearly defined collective goals. China's multilateral initiatives, therefore, tend to avoid formal rulemaking or the promotion of universal values. Within these settings, China and its partners rarely share strong normative foundations, nor do they seek to impose rules that fully align interests and behavior. Instead, cooperation is cultivated through improvised resemblance, primarily by managing bilateral relationships, offering economic benefits, and responding to partners' needs. Regular meetings and high-level summits reinforce inclusion and connectivity, enabling flexible collective identities such as partnership or comradeship to emerge without rigid institutionalization.

This article argues that China's management of multilateral frameworks is not primarily aimed at overturning the existing international order or replacing established powers. Instead, China has sought to create alternative institutional spaces grounded in relational security for itself and for states that have difficulty adapting to Western-led multilateralism. These frameworks allow countries with diverse political systems, including Central Asian states that do not conform to liberal democratic or human rights norms, to participate collectively within China-centered regional settings. The BoR theoretical framework provides the most suitable lens for understanding this logic and its implications. ■

Rethinking Global Politics in Crisis Times

While it appears commonplace to attest that the present is characterised by a profound inability to agree on much at all, there is nevertheless an underlying shared recognition that we are living through a multidimensional crisis.



In this short contribution, I would like to outline one very significant aspect of this crisis which I argue is central in shaping experiences of a profound loss of common purpose and orientation. My objective here is not to suggest that other factors are unimportant, but rather to highlight a core feature of the current conjuncture that has not (yet) received the level of attention it clearly deserves. Some aspects of what some term the contemporary polycrisis appear self-evident: the disruptive power of rapid developments in digital technologies and AI; the decline of mutually binding international conventions and legal recourse; the return and rise of geopolitics including wars over territories and violent scrambles for resources; and the corrosive effects of social marginalisation, economic inequality and experiences of decline, real or imagined. Not a day goes by without these themes dominating the news-cycle in one form or another.

I believe, however, that these circumstances are conditioned by another set of concerns which are more far-reaching and potentially transformative. A brief thought experiment can elucidate this:

Picture yourself living through the late 18th and early 19th century, a time when industrial capitalism was gradually (and unevenly) taking hold across Europe, while at the same time European powers were extracting enormous wealth in terms of labour and resources from colonised societies. What Karl Polanyi described as ‘the great transformation’ created, as he argued persuasively, unprecedented social problems. Alongside the explosion in productivity and wealth-creation came impoverishment and systemic social exclusion, something that social scientists have described as the Social Question.

Everything you thought you knew about the political order in and with which you lived would have changed quite

radically throughout that period. Old authorities were replaced by new, powerful elites, access to law and the dispensation of public order was transformed, and entirely new fields of administrative concerns were established, in particular with regard to 'welfare'. Mass unemployment as a consequence of subsistence now depending on successfully accessing labour-markets gave rise to an entirely new phenomenon: systemic socio-economic exclusion. This was and still is the Social Question, a profound and persistent challenge for socio-political organisation within economic relations shaped by capitalism.

The promise to resolve the Social Question was made contingent on including the excluded parts of the population in gainful employment, thereby making them full participants in the economy. The precondition for such inclusion became economic growth, believed to expand the range of opportunities for participation in labour markets.

Fast forward to today, and the Social Question still looms large, both in domestic settings and internationally. The threat of redundancies, i.e. forced exits from labour-market relations, due to technological change is not the cause, but rather just another symptom of trends that have been with us since the early days of the industrial revolution.

Today, however, the rise of the Ecological Question is reconfiguring the seemingly intractable challenge of the Social Question. Environmental issues have increasingly been registered as being urgent in the second half of the 20th century. For many today, climate change figures as the main, if not the only indicator of the Ecological Question. However, we should remind ourselves that even if we were to collectively (and globally) wean ourselves off fossil-fuel overconsumption and successfully arrest global warming effects, we would still face multiple, deeply troubling ecological challenges: biodiversity loss in general, desertification not (exclusively) due to warming, marine and atmospheric plastification, deforestation, the devastating effects of agricultural run-off (fertilisers, herbicides, fungicides, pesticides), pollinator decline, and so on.

When they became established in the minds of international policymakers during the last century, these problems triggered a search for a coordinated pathway to a 'greener' future. The United Nations' 1987 Brundtland Report formulated this roughly in the following way: The more economic growth we have, the more pressure we take off the Social Question, and the more money we will have to spend on fixing the environment. This sentiment continues to shape our

collective response to what is now the twin challenge of the Social and the Ecological Question. It evidently underpins the latest efforts to coordinate a global response, namely the UN's Sustainable Development Goals agenda.

Nevertheless, this narrative is no longer plausible today.

We have witnessed enormous economic growth globally since 1987, yet the numbers of socio-politically excluded people have remained stubbornly high and continue to increase, despite all promises to address the Social Question. Where the Ecological Question is concerned, it has since proven too hard to even focus on climate change as the most obvious and widely acknowledged challenge, never mind all the others. As environmental provisions and regulations are rolled back to make new room for further economic growth, we are faced with a profound dilemma: either address the Social Question, or the Ecological Question.

The present polycrisis is an expression of the absurdity of such choices. Pursuing economic growth at the expense of a dying planet is obviously and inevitably collectively self-defeating, yet there seem to be few if any convincing narratives which point away from this dilemma. Rather, escape fantasies abound among those widely considered to be at the vanguard of future development: Zuckerberg into an underground bunker, Musk to Mars.

The most urgent task for policymakers is to find examples of communities who have successfully addressed both the Social and the Ecological Question in creative ways. There are more of them than most would expect, and we would be well advised to become more curious about how they make it work. ■



MARTIN WEBER is an AIA NRW Associate Fellow and teaches at the University of Queensland in Australia. His research focuses on international relations, critical social theory, and environmental and sustainability policy. In his work, he focuses in particular on global crises, social inequality, and the political challenges of ecological change.

“The most urgent task for policymakers is to find examples of communities who have successfully addressed both the Social and the Ecological Question in creative ways.”

Martin Weber



THE ACADEMY OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The Academy of International Affairs NRW in the Federal City of Bonn is dedicated to the global challenges and structural changes in international politics in the 21st century. As the Academy's central focus, its Fellowship programme promotes scientific and scholarly excellence and builds international and interdisciplinary connections.





INSIDE AIA

Knowledge Transfer for Societal Impact

Bringing scholars and experts from different parts of the world to NRW offers opportunities for meaningful exchange with politicians, regional administration, local civil society, academics and other multipliers interested in international politics.

Anyone wishing to understand, let alone predict, the manifold developments in the global sphere requires in-depth research and a keen comprehension of processes and key actors. With alliances shifting amidst domestic challenges to liberal norms and quarrels within NATO, an increasingly strengthened China and both civil and interstate wars wrecking many states with little public awareness, when seeking to fathom international politics attention must necessarily be paid to the underlying processes in different regions, the rationales of established and new actors alike, and particularly to trends that will

shape the future world. While international politics may often seem remote, it affects almost everyone's lives, not least in a highly entangled connected state like NRW. The external relations, for example, take the form of cross-border cooperation to ensure sufficient and sustainable energy supply as in the privileged partnership with Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, which also ensures collaboration in security matters or in building a joint digital infrastructure. NRW has thus become a site and an actor of international politics.

“The Academy’s outreach activities, which are geared towards bidirectional knowledge transfer, are one of the most important ways of engaging with a wider public.”

FIVE YEARS ACADEMY OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Over its five years of existence, the Academy has gathered profound expertise in a multitude of issues and processes relevant to North Rhine-Westphalia. Annual focus topics that reflect on central current challenges such as disinformation, artificial intelligence, outer space politics, subnational diplomacy and structural transformation allow the Academy to pool and concentrate research and events to analyse the state of affairs and reflect on potential policy trajectories. The combination of academic research with expertise from vital societal areas allows for an informed, goal-oriented debate, benefitting significantly from the fellows’ readiness to engage with each other and challenge their own and others’ perspectives. Over the years, all generations of fellows and associate fellows have now come to form a learning community whose efforts remain instrumental to generating essential knowledge for understanding international politics and its impact on NRW.

BIDIRECTIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

The Academy’s outreach activities, which are geared towards bidirectional knowledge transfer, are one of the most important ways of engaging with a wider public. While academic workshops and talks are a staple of this outreach, a variety of different activities and formats also serve to position the Academy as a bridge between societal interest and the seemingly removed sphere of research. AIA Fellows are thus at the centre of all outreach activities, bringing their insights and perspectives to Bonn.

The following provides an overview of the various ways in which the Academy has been showcasing its Fellows’ diverse and thought-provoking projects to different audiences.



“Science communication requires knowledge of two quite distinct worlds that often find it difficult to interact.”



TRANSLATION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

The translation of academic research to the political reality of stakeholders like the Representation of NRW in Brussels, members of the NRW parliament or members of the German Bundestag has been a particularly interesting challenge. Science communication requires knowledge of two quite distinct worlds that often find it difficult to interact. The Academy is well equipped to navigate and overcome this divide and can draw on the extensive expertise of its fellows to that end. Two particularly impressive encounters were an event during a trip to Berlin where fellows shared their first-hand experience of the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan with a group of politicians and security experts and a talk on Chinese foreign policy that countered some of the most strongly held beliefs. Regular meetings with working groups of NRW parliamentarians, including the parliamentary friendship groups like NRW-USA, NRW-Turkey and NRW-Poland/Ukraine/Central and Eastern Europe/the Baltic States, and joining a brown bag lunch format at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Action and Energy have established a trustful working relationship between the Academy and the NRW Parliament and state authorities. This solid working relationship ensures a mutual sensitivity for current and future international relations topics.

COOPERATIONS

Regular cooperation with partner institutions based in Bonn and the wider region has also contributed to broadening the Academy's visibility and outreach. Inclusive formats such as the brown bag lunches at IDOS or joint webinars with the Development and Peace Foundation pool resources of institutions with an overlapping focus and strengthen the Bonn's standing as a hub for international politics. As the German UN City, Bonn also offers a unique opportunity to situate the Academy in its dense networks of private and public research and policy institutes that address key problems in the world. This includes the Academy's regular participation at the annual UN day where UN agencies and actors from the fields of development cooperation, peace research and international politics engage with citizens and inform them about their tasks and profile. AIA fellows and staff alike organise fun activities for children and chat with visitors, firmly embedding the Academy in the international Bonn environment.



EVENTS

The Academy's recurrent joint events with the Amerika-Haus NRW e. V. and the Bonn branch of the Korean Embassy always address local audiences and take place in central, accessible locations such as the Heinrich-Heine-Institut in Düsseldorf, the Auslandsgesellschaft in Düsseldorf and various locations in Bonn, drawing attention to the relevance of engaging with longstanding questions of international politics such as Transatlantic relations and Germany's role vis-à-vis security in China and East Asia.

EXCHANGE

The Academy also serves as an exchange hub for actors whose paths do not always cross. Groups of students and engaged activists, for instance, come together with fellows in workshops and other kinds of meeting formats at the Academy to talk about the potential for more systematically including young people's perspectives when it comes to climate change or diversity. City diplomats from Duisburg, Bonn, Düsseldorf and Dortmund have become important and appreciated members of the Academy's network and have used their meetings at the Academy to further collaborate on matters of subnational politics. NRW business networks' interest in joining events on subnational diplomacy or cooperation with the East Asian region is testimony to the potential for bringing Academy expertise to a variety of stakeholders and opening new avenues for meaningful exchange. Furthermore, AIA fellows act as emissaries of the Academy when attending international meetings such as climate summits and trade fairs, or when invited to speak at international organisations.

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

Through its fellowship programme, its manifold events and the various publications geared specifically towards expert audiences (Discussion Papers), decision-makers (Policy Briefs) and an interested public (Magazine), the Academy continues to broaden and strengthen its activities, building a profile that serves to fulfill the need for expertise and orientation as well as its corporate purpose. The unique approach of anchoring research into international politics in the particular context of the state of NRW has been fruitful and will further shape the Academy's activities for years to come. ■



AIA Team

Contact our team here:



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MARTIN HILDEBRANDT

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and the Team



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Student Assistant



HANNAH MAURITZ

Student Assistant



The International Academic Board

Continuity and Change
in the Academy's Fifth Year



“The Board’s contribution, like that of each year’s Fellow cohort, comes from the range of perspectives it brings together – across continents, disciplines and between academic and practical experience.”

Mikko Huotari

When the Academy of International Affairs NRW opened its doors in 2020, few would have predicted how rapidly the world it set out to understand would change. Five years on, the Academy looks back on a remarkable journey – from a young institution finding its feet to an established forum for international scholarly exchange, rooted in Bonn’s distinctive international and academic ecosystem and visible well beyond it. The fifth anniversary is therefore not only a moment for celebration but also one for reflection: on the Academy’s mission, its thematic profile, and the work of those tasked with shaping its intellectual orientation.

The International Academic Board has been part of that journey from the outset, and the past year has brought both continuity and change. Building on the foundations laid under my predecessor Angelika Nußberger, the Board has continued its core function: helping select Fellows and serving as a sounding board for the Executive Director and her team on the substantive direction of the Academy’s work. One question has been particularly present in those discussions: how to sharpen the Academy’s thematic profile at a moment when international politics is being reshaped by overlapping crises. The new thematic anchor the Academy’s leadership has developed for this work – “comprehensive security” – now informs the 2027/28 fellowship call alongside a parallel track open to other pressing questions, and it has the Board’s full support. It reflects a shared conviction that security today can no longer be understood narrowly: its military, economic, technological, environmental and societal dimensions are inseparable, and an academy committed to international affairs in this decade must be able to think across all of them.

The composition of the Board itself has also evolved. Two distinguished members have completed their terms: Sir Robin Niblett, who shaped the global debate on international affairs during his fifteen years as Director of Chatham House (2007–2022), and Robert Ragnar Spano, former President of the European Court of Human Rights and now a Partner at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher in London. Both have contributed thoughtful and rigorous voices to our deliberations; on behalf of the Board I extend our sincere thanks for their service. We are equally pleased to welcome Māris

Andžāns, Director of the Center for Geopolitical Studies in Riga, who brings deep expertise on Northern European security, transatlantic relations and the geopolitics of the Baltic region – perspectives of particular weight at this moment. Further appointments, agreed in principle with the State Chancellery, are expected to broaden the Board’s geographic and thematic reach in the coming months.

The wider international landscape only underscores the importance of forums such as this Academy. Established orders are fraying, new fault lines are emerging, and the boundary between domestic and foreign policy is dissolving – nowhere more visibly than at the intersection of technology, economic statecraft and security. The Board’s contribution, like that of each year’s Fellow cohort, comes from the range of perspectives it brings together – across continents, disciplines and between academic and practical experience. In a moment this uncertain, no single vantage point is enough. Working in good faith with an Academy team led with foresight by Executive Director Dr. Maysoun Zein Al Din, the Board looks forward to continuing to contribute in this spirit. On behalf of all members, I thank State Secretary Christian Wiermer and the State Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia for the trust and steady support that make the Academy and its Board possible. ■



Mikko Huotari is Executive Director of the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin, Co-Chair of the Bundestag Commission for the Review of Security-Related Economic Relations between Germany and China, a member of the German-Chinese Dialogue Forum, and Chair of the International Academic Board of the Academy of International Affairs NRW. He studied in Freiburg, Nanjing and Shanghai, and works on European-Chinese relations and China’s role in the international order.

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Members of the Academic Board

The interdisciplinary **Academic Board** decides on the awarding of fellowships and advises the Academy on scientific issues. It thus makes an important contribution to the Academy's profile and its central tasks.





**PROF. DR.
AKOSUA ADOMAKO
AMPOFO**

University of Ghana, Center for Gender Studies and Advocacy, Accra



**PROF. DR.
JACLYN NEO**

National University of Singapore, Centre for Asian Legal Studies



**DR.
MĀRIS ANDŽĀNS**

Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga, Riga Stradins University



**PROF. DR. DR. H.C. DR. H.C.
ANGELIKA NUßBERGER
M.A.**

University of Cologne, Academy for European Human Rights Protection



**DR.
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**PROF. DR.
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**PROF. DR.
ROBERT S. LITWAK**

Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University



**PROF. DR.
MELANIE W. SISSON**

The Brookings Institute, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Washington D.C.



**DR.
KARL-HEINZ KAMP**

German Council on Foreign Relations, Rome



**STATE SECRETARY
CHRISTIAN WIERMER
(DEPUTY CHAIR)**

State Government Spokesperson of North Rhine-Westphalia, State Secretary for European and International Affairs



**PROF. DR.
ASSAF MOGHADAM**

Dean and Associate Professor at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at Reichman University, Israel

ACADEMY EVENTS

04/25–03/26

2025

WORKSHOP

"The Power of Dialogue and the Impact of Silencing in Foreign Policy"

07.–08.04.

initiated by AIA Associate Fellows Mariia Levchenko, Berghof Foundation and Bernhard Stahl, University of Passau, with Mariana Barchuk-Halyk, Center for Civilians in Conflict, Julius Bonaventura, University of Passau, Pascale da Rocha, Berghof Foundation, Sebastian Glassner, University of Passau, Mira Groh, University of Passau, Sören Keil, University of Passau, Izzat Khushbakov, Berghof Foundation, Katharina McLarren, Max-Planck-Institute Heidelberg, Yaroslav Minkin, STAN, Dorothee Mölle, University of Passau, Baptiste Raymond, Tusker Club, Elisabeth Schweiger, University of Stirling

GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE

"Masculinities of Tajik labor migrants: Transformations of gender roles and practices in a transnational migration context"

16.04.

with Rustam Samadov, Humboldt University Berlin

GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE

"Reshuffle Research: Exploring decolonial and inclusive approaches"

06.05.

with Tâmara Andrade, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)

VISIT

Visit Parliamentary Group NRW-USA, State Parliament Düsseldorf

13.05.



with John Austin, AIA Associate Fellow

EVENT

Together in Transition: Lessons from the Ruhr Region and the Rust Belt

10.06.



Cooperation event with the AmerikaHaus and John Austin, AIA Associate Fellow, Emily Adams, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), Juliane Borosch, University of Duisburg-Essen, Jörg Kemna, Business Metropole Ruhr GmbH (BMR)

EVENT

AIA Summer Academy

15.-19.06.



with Jihad Mohammed Alharbi, Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Aisha Altamimi, European Affairs Department United Arab Emirates, Patiwe Booi-Mokoena, Embassy of the Republic of South Africa, Rebecca Braun, Consulate of Canada, Stuart Brown, Scotland Malawi Partnership, Florentino Cabrera García, Embassy of Mexico, Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska, University of Lodz, Paul Costello, German Marshall Fund Cities, Thomas Dermine, Mayor of Charleroi/Belgium, Tamara Ehs, Ehs & Fils Democracy Consulting, Willow Fortunoff, University of Harvard/UNFCCC Engagement Division, Andrea Frenzel, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Steven Frigerio, The Hive Ventures, Charlotte Gehrke, IDOS, Martina Guzmán, Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights Detroit, Nils Hegewisch, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Jürgen Hein, Research Alliance Ruhr, Gabriela I. Iacobuță, Global Environment Facility (GEF), Mujtaba Ali Isani, Quaid-e-Azam University Pakistan, Tomasz Kamiński, University of Lodz, Tonka Kostadinova, University of Cyprus, Bartłomiej Książek, Consulate General of the Republic of Poland, Stuart MacDonald, ICR Research, Ifedayo Grace Malachi, Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Nigeria, Anne Mervenne, Mervenne & Company, Michigan/USA, Jaehoon Min, Embassy of the Republic of Korea (Bonn Office), Oyewole Simon Oginni, Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (bicc), Kelvina Osei Dapaah, Embassy of Ghana, Andy Paice, CrownShy, Steve Patterson, Mayor of Athens/Ohio, Oliver Pilz, Cabinet of the Mayor of Budapest, Alexander Plé, IQIB - Institute for Qualifying Innovation Research and Consulting GmbH, Debora Prado, Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU), Kumar Prashant, Circle Economy Foundation, Amsterdam/The Netherlands, Oliver Rohde, German Aerospace Center (DLR), Agata Rydzewska, University of Warsaw,

David Schulze, Ruhr University Bochum, Kent Smith, Ohio State Senator/USA, Ryan Sorenson, Mayor Sheboygan Wisconsin/USA, Janina Stürner-Siovtz, European Philanthropic Initiative for Migration, Brussels, Tim White, London School of Economics and Political Science, Helen Yu, Mayors Migration Council, Paris

VISIT

Visit of BIMUN Group

25.06.



Exchange with AIA Fellows Chisomo Banda, Chiung-Chiu Huang, Anna Shpakovskaya and Martin Weber

GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE

"Minority counter-politics between everyday survival and populist geo-politics"

01.07.

with Philipp Lottholz, Collaborative Research Centre/Transregio "Dynamics of Security" and Center for Conflict Studies, Philipps-University of Marburg

GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE

"The Global South and the End of International Relations Theory"

16.07.

with Prof. Chih-yu Shih, Tongji University, Shanghai

VISIT

Visit of Dr. Frank Hochapfel (State Chancellery Düsseldorf)

22.07.

Exchange with AIA Associate Fellows John Austin, Summar Iqbal Babar, Chisomo Banda, Anna Shpakovskaya and Martin Weber

FELLOW RECEPTION

Fellow Reception at Residency of US Consul General Preeti V. Shah

25.07.

with AIA Fellows Chisomo Banda, Chiung-Chiu Huang, Anna Shpakovskaya and AIA Associate Fellows Chelsea Haramia, Mariia Levchenko and Inna Supac

VISIT

Visit of Nathanael Liminski, Minister for Federal and European Affairs, International Affairs, Media, and Head of the State Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia

15.08.

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

A Changing World Order: Europe's Strategic Role and the Future of Transatlantic Relations

12.09.



with Christoph Heusgen, Co-Chairman, St. Gallen Symposium and former Head of the Munich Security Conference (MSC), Viktoria Harbecke, AmerikaHaus NRW e.V.

MEETING

Academic Board Meeting AIA

13.09.

Selection Process 2025 for new Fellow Cohort

WORKSHOP

"To Be or Not To Be Tokenized? Unpacking the Performative Nature of Meaningful Youth Participation"

19.09.

initiated by AIA Associate Fellow Chisomo Banda with Romance Bassingha, Kevin Hill, Malin Körnich, Laura Mangala, Lucy Mende, Sherry Obasuyi, Madiha Sarferaz, Midia Shero, Milad Tabesch, Jasmin Turanoglu and Leonie Wanner

WEBINAR

"Peace with or Protection from Russia? Rethinking Europe's Security after Ukraine" (in collaboration with Bonn Symposium (sef:))

01.10.

with AIA Associate Fellow Mariia Levchenko, Oberst Hennadiy „H“ Kovalenko, Department of International Defence Cooperation, Ministry of Defence, Ukraine, Christina Horváth-Stenner, Berghof Foundation

PANEL DISCUSSION

"Breaking US Big-Tech's Chains: Transatlantic Collaboration on Building Robust University-Linked Innovation Ecosystems"

08.10.

initiated by AIA Associate Fellow John Austin with Andy Westwood, University of Manchester and Government Advisor, UK, Kelly Sexton, Vice President, Research, Innovation & Economic Impact, University of Michigan, US, Ann Fitzgerald, Director, Balsillie School of International Affairs, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, Edwin Milligan, Northern Accelerator, Senior Project Manager, Durham University, UK, Sarah Chaytor, Director of Strategy and Policy at City College, London, Dan Breznitz, Co-Director, Innovation Policy Lab, Munk Chair of Innovation Studies, University of Toronto, Canada, Gerhard Schembecker, Vice President, Dortmund University, and Board Member Center for Entrepreneurship and Transfer, Germany, Prof. Dr. Pedro José Marrón, University of Duisburg-Essen, Vice-Rector for Transfer, Innovation and Digitalisation, Baiju Shah, CEO, Cleveland Partnership, Dominik Bartz, HUB Manager Internationalization; Duisburg Business and Innovation, Jeff Terrell, Partner, Arboretum Ventures, Ann Arbor, Michigan

EVENT

AIA at the UN Day in Bonn

11.10.

All-day event at Bonn Market Square, presentation of the Academy's activities

PANEL DISCUSSION

**“From Research to Diplomacy:
The Future of Transatlantic Engagement in Space”**
(in cooperation with the AmerikaHaus NRW e.V.)
14.10.



with John Horack, Ohio State University and inaugural holder of the Neil Armstrong Chair in Aerospace Policy at The Ohio State University, AIA Associate Fellow Raúl González Muñoz, University of Leicester, UK, Martin Wein, Journalist

EVENT

International Security Forum Bonn 2025
30.10.



Reception and Dinner Speech at AIA on “Europe’s Future in Space” with State Secretary Paul Höller, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Protection, and Energy of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and Antje Nötzold, University of the Federal Armed Forces Munich

WORKSHOP

“National Soft Power: Policy, Strategy and Measurement”
12.11.

initiated by AIA Associate Fellow Stuart Mac Donald with Evie Aspinall, British Foreign Policy Group, Susanne Baumgart, Goethe Institute, Dong-ho Han, Korea Institute for National Unification, Seoul, Brendan Howe, University of Heidelberg, Suk-young Joo, Embassy of the Republic of Korea (Bonn Office), Mona Lotten,

British Council, Jae Hoon Min, Embassy of the Republic of Korea (Bonn Office), Jake van Clief, University of Edinburgh and AIA Associate Fellows Summar Iqbal Babar and Martin Weber

CONFERENCE

“South Korean Soft Power and Beyond. Lessons from the Korean Wave for Cultural Diplomacy” (in cooperation with the Embassy of Korea, Bonn Office)
13.11.



with AIA Associate Fellow Stuart MacDonald, Susanne Baumgart, Goethe Institute, Brendan Howe, University of Heidelberg, Natalia Grincheva, Lasalle College of the Arts, Dong-ho Han, Korea Institute for National Unification and Hannes Mosler, University Duisburg-Essen

**GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE
BOOK PRESENTATION**

“The Crimean Tatars. History, Culture, Politics”
25.11.

with AIA Associate Fellow Hüseyin Çiçek, Mieste Hotopp-Riecke, Magdeburg, Sarah Reinke, Göttingen, Elnara Nuriieva-Letova, Berlin

WORKSHOP**Science Dialogue Day****08.12.**

in cooperation with the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Programme of the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) and Max Bolz, Hochschule Bonn-Rhein-Sieg, Elisabeth Chepkemboi Kötter, Shaping Futures (IDOS), Simone Christ, PGP, IDOS, Sven Grimm, IDOS, Karen Hattenbach, UNU-EHS, Jutta Heckel, GIZ, Vera-Fluixá Ramiro, Bundesagentur für Arbeit, Tatjana Reiber, IDOS, Wulf Reiners, IDOS, Almuth Schellpepper, Deutsche Welle Akademie, Anna Schwachula, IDOS, Georg Verweyen, University of Cologne, Johanna Vogel, IDOS, Silke Weinlich, UNSSC, Janette Yamanian, UNU-EHS

PANEL DISCUSSION**"Autocracy On the Rise – Can Cities Save Democracy?"****09.12.**

initiated by AIA Associate Fellow Tamara Ehs with Sanja Bojanić, University of Rijeka, Academy of Applied Arts, Helfried Carl, European Capital of Democracy, János Kendernay, Budapest City Hall, Theresa Reymann, Office for International and European Affairs, City of Düsseldorf, AIA Associate Fellow Stuart MacDonald

2026**GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE****"How do Empires Act?"****20.01.**

with Eva Marlene Hausteiner, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg)

WORKSHOP**"Heritage Across Borders: Translocal Diaspora Networks and Pathways to Inclusive Peace"****19.-20.02.**

initiated by AIA Associate Fellow Summar Iqbal Babar and Ifedayo Grace Malachi with Bayan Anouz, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, Hamburg, Asrat Gella, Center for Development Research (ZEF), Fatemeh Hippler, political scientist and migration advisor, Jochen Hippler, political scientist and peace researcher, Mujtaba Isani, Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan, Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan, Christopher Nsoh Ndikum, International Relations Institute Cameroon, Raja Qaiser Ahmed Khan, Oxford Business College, Farhan Siddiqi, Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, Inci Öykü Yener-Roderburg, Lund University

CONFERENCE**"European Regions and the Future of Europe's Soft Power", State Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, Brussels****05.03.**

initiated by AIA Associate Fellow Stuart MacDonald with Grace Barningham, UK Mission to the EU, Corneliu Bjola, University of Oxford, Aisling Conboy, Wilton Park, John Edward, Scottish Council for Global Affairs, Frank Hochapfel, State Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia, Michael Hörig, DAAD, Brussels, Nick Leake, Scottish Government, Brussels, Andrew Murray, ICR Research, Hendrik Ohnesorge, University of Bonn, Bastien Revel, European Committee of the Regions (CoR), Julia Sattler, Goethe Institute, Brussels, Denise Schmidt, Represen-

tation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the European Union, Rainer Steffens, Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the European Union, Stefan van Heek, Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the European Union, Christine Wilson, British Council, Marlene Würde, Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the European Union, Walter Zampieri, European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)

WORKSHOP

“The Colonial Imprints of the Contemporary Polycrisis: Political Challenges and Possibilities” and Panel Discussion “German Colonialism and its first Genocide”
11.03.



Initiated by AIA Associate Fellows Heloise and Martin Weber with Henning Melber, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Julia Manek, Medico International, Katharina B. Hacker, International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), Aline Barbosa Pereira, University of Bonn, Julia Binter, University of Bonn, Jeanine Bischoff, University of Bonn, Rosario Figari Layus, University of Bonn, Mitra Heydari, University of Bonn, Karolina Kluczevska, AIA Associate Fellow, Felix Koopmann, University of Bonn, Luvena Kopp, University of Bonn, Mercy Maishingaidze, University of Bonn, Philemon Mtoi, University of Bonn, Neema Munisi, University of Bonn, Djamila Patt, University of Bonn, Anita Pobi, University of Bonn, Philipp Rohn, University of Bonn, Clément Roux, University of Bonn, Amelie Schöller, University of Bonn, Cihan Simsek, University of Bonn, Carla Vasco Paez, University of Bonn, Ann-Sophie Vornholz, University of Bonn, Pia Wiegink, University of Bonn, Viviann Wilmot, University of Bonn, Leonie Wolters, University of Bonn

GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE

“BRICS+ and Europe-China relations”

16.03.

with Dr. Huanyu Zhao, Chent University

WEBINAR

“Brazilian Paradiplomacy: Historical Trajectories, Institutions, and Case Studies”

19.03.

initiated by Débora Prado, AIA Associate Fellow with Joanna Ciesielska-Klikowska, University of Lodz, Poland, Liliana Ramalho Froio, Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), Brazil, Marinana Andrade e Barros, Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC Minas), Brazil, Cairo Borges Junqueira, Federal University of Sergipe (PPGRI/UFS), Brazil

GLOBAL POLICY DIALOGUE

“Unsere Menschen sind nicht frei!” Churches and Pluralistic Diplomacy in the Struggle for an Independent Namibia (1946–1990)”

24.03.

with David Brandon Smith, Goethe University, Frankfurt

RE:THINK Academy-Magazine#04**Publisher:**

Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie
für Internationale Politik gGmbH

Executive Director: Maysoun Zein Al Din

Chairman of the Supervisory Board: Harald Hemmer

Commercial Register Court: Amtsgericht Bonn

Company registration number: HRB 25581

Editorial Team: Manuel Becker (Editor), Katja Freistein, Lisa Hartmann, Stephan Masseling

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Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie
für Internationale Politik gGmbH
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Telephone: +49 228 50 43 12-60
E-mail: info@aia-nrw.org ■ www.aia-nrw.org

Proofreading: Jeremy Groves ■ Landau

Design: Abdank & Milardović ■ Designbüro ■ Düsseldorf

Production: Das Druckhaus Print und Medien GmbH ■ Im Hasseldamm 6 ■ 41352 Korschenbroich

Circulation: 600

Publication: annually

Issue: 2026

Photo Credits:

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