

The three great myths of NATO

The self-proclaimed defence alliance sees itself as the guardian of law and democracy. In reality, it is leaving a blood trail of devastation across the world.

by Sevim Dagdelen,* Germany



Sevim Dagdelen. (Photo sevimdagdelen.de)

This year, NATO is celebrating its 75th birthday and appears to be at the peak of its power. More than ever before, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is focusing on expansion. In Ukraine, NATO is waging a proxy war against Russia in response to its war of aggression, which violates

international law: The military pact is involved in training Ukrainian soldiers in NATO weapons, with massive deliveries of weapons, intelligence information and the provision of target data as well as its own soldiers on the ground.

The delivery of cruise missiles, such as the German *Taurus* type, to Ukraine, which can reach Moscow or St Petersburg with a range of 500 kilometres, is being discussed, as is the deployment of large-scale NATO troops. The signs are pointing to a storm.

NATO is expanding its presence in Asia: By integrating new partner states such as Japan and South Korea, it is advancing into the Indo-Pacific region and seeking a confrontation with China. The military expenditure of the USA and the other NATO member states is soaring to record levels. While the arms suppliers are popping champagne corks, the gigantic costs of armament are being passed on to the population.

Overstretch, social upheaval and the risk of escalation are the downside of this expansive power policy. They challenge the alliance in an unprecedented way. This makes NATO even more dependent on legends today. Three major myths run from the founding of the military pact through its bloody history to the present day.

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The myth of defence and international law

NATO is a defence alliance. This is the eternally repeated narrative. But a look at the history of the military pact shows: Neither was mutual defence the main focus when NATO was founded, nor can there be any talk of a defensive orientation in NATO's appearance over the past decades. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is often cited as proof of NATO's character as a defence alliance.

In its founding agreement, the twelve signatory states – the USA and Canada as well as the European states Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal – agreed in 1949 that “an armed attack against one [party] or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered as an attack against them all”. The NATO members undertake to assist each other to jointly defend themselves against such an attack.

Here, the *Inter-American Treaty of Mutual Assistance* served as an explicit model. This mutual assistance pact was concluded by the American member states in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1947 on Washington's initiative and came into force a year later. In the face of the Cold War, the USA wanted to secure its dominance on the American continent with this treaty, because of which the *Organisation of American States* (OAS) was founded in the same year. This was in the spirit of an updated *Monroe Doctrine*, with which the USA had declared the western hemisphere to be its exclusive zone of influence in 1823.

NATO is also part of this tradition. As with the inter-American treaty, the signatory states of the North Atlantic Treaty are completely unbalanced in terms of power and military policy. It is therefore clear that the USA was not interested in support from other alliance partners in the event of defence when it founded NATO. Rather, Washington is striving to create a “Pax Americana”, an exclusive sphere of influence that gives the USA, as the undisputed leading power, control over the foreign and security policy of the other alliance

partners. The basis of NATO is an exchange. The other NATO members give up parts of their democratic sovereignty and are rewarded with the NATO security guarantee, which is de facto a security guarantee from the USA.

Within the military pact, the remaining NATO members sink to the level of client states like those that once served as a military buffer zone in the east of the Roman Empire to maintain the Roman Empire's power. Any domestic political change that could have jeopardised their foreign policy orientation was forbidden to these client states on pain of their own downfall. To prevent such developments, NATO relied on its own coup organisations during the Cold War with its "stay behind" groups. They also used terrorist means to actively prevent political forces that questioned NATO membership from gaining power.

The end of the systemic conflict with the Soviet Union radically changed the primary purpose of NATO, which was to create a Pax Americana. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has increasingly seen itself in the role of world policeman. With the invasion of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which at that time still consisted of Serbia and Montenegro, the military pact waged its first war in 1999. A clear breach of international law, as the then German Chancellor *Gerhard Schröder* himself admitted fifteen years later: "We sent our planes [...] to Serbia, and together with NATO they bombed a sovereign state – without there having been a Security Council decision." After this original sin, NATO is developing into a warfare pact that is prepared to break international law. A clear contradiction to its own charter, in which, according to Article 1, the NATO states undertake to "refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations". The defence of the alliance's territory now becomes merely part of its claim to act as a global force for order.

In 2003, the NATO members USA and Great Britain invaded Iraq in a war of aggression in violation of international law. They put together a "coalition of the willing" specifically for this purpose, which also included numerous other NATO members such as Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Portugal and Slovakia, as well as the later NATO members Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia and

Lithuania. Washington and its accomplices are thus blatantly violating international law and the NATO states involved are violating the basic provisions of their own charter. The Iraq war is also accompanied by the deployment of NATO Awacs in Turkey, which can be interpreted as support for the war. Even if the war against Iraq is not a NATO war, there are serious arguments for attributing the invasion to the military pact.

NATO members such as Germany did not deny the USA the use of military bases as part of the NATO structure in Europe and did not deny them overflight rights for US forces, although the German government's commitment to the rules of international law in accordance with Article 20 Paragraph 3 and Article 25 of the Basic Law prohibits it from participating in actions by non-German sovereigns on German soil if these violate international law.

The war of aggression against Iraq by some of the NATO members in violation of international law was not even discussed in the NATO Council, nor was the use of NATO infrastructure. Their violation of the North Atlantic Treaty had no impact on the NATO membership of the USA or the UK. That was foreseeable. The war policy of the most important member of the alliance must therefore be attributed to the NATO military pact as a whole if one takes NATO's self-image seriously. With its wars that violate international law, the USA stands as *pars pro toto*, as part of the whole.

In Afghanistan, NATO has been waging a disastrous war for twenty years that has cost the lives of over 200,000 civilians. For the first and so far, only time, the alliance is invoking Article 5 of the NATO Treaty in this military operation following the attacks of 11 September 2001. The international public is to be made to believe that the freedom and security of the West are being defended in the Hindu Kush. Twenty years later, in August 2021, the Taliban move back into Kabul. The military operation proves to be a disaster.

The USA's attempt to gain a military foothold in Central Asia to challenge China and Russia geopolitically has failed. The USA is leaving the country head over heels. Washington does not even inform its allies. Thousands of local NATO forces are being left in the lurch. There is no sign of any alliance solidarity. To obtain information, the German foreign intelligence service is even desperately considering bugging the Americans.

In addition to Belgrade, Baghdad and Kabul, NATO's trail of blood also leads to Libya. In 2011, NATO bombed the country in violation of international law and abusing a UN Security Council resolution. Thousands are killed. Hundreds of thousands are forced to flee. A delegation from the African Union attempting to mediate in the conflict is even prevented from landing. What remains is a devastated country, parts of which are ruled by Islamist militias. As a result, the entire Sahel region is destabilised by *al-Qaeda* and the *Islamic State* (IS). The individual members of NATO must take responsibility for this catastrophe. *Totum pro parte*, the whole stands for the part. This also applies to member states that were not directly involved in the attacks.

The myth of democracy and the rule of law

NATO members are determined to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, based on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law", according to the legitimising legend of the founding charter. But this was already an outright lie in 1949. It is not only in Latin America that the USA has made pacts with dictatorships and fascist regimes from the outset, and it is not only democracies that are on board with the NATO allies in Europe. The only decisive factor is the willingness to join a front against the Soviet Union.

The USA concluded bilateral security agreements with the fascist dictator of Spain, *Francisco Franco*, and the fascist dictatorship of Portugal is a founding member of NATO. While the secret police of the dictator *António de Oliveira Salazar* tortured opposition members to death and set up concentration camps in the Portuguese colonies, the USA included Portugal in the community of democrats.

Or let's take Turkey. Thousands of political prisoners are tortured after the military coup of 1980. On the tenth anniversary on 12 September 1990, the newspaper "Cumhuriyet" spoke of 650,000 political arrests, 7,000 death sentences requested, 571 imposed and 50 carried out, and 171 proven deaths by torture. Turkey remains a member of NATO. Even after the military coup, it receives extensive military aid from the USA and its allies. The rule of the generals is not detrimental to membership. The same applies to Greece.

The military coup of 1967, concentration camps and murders of members of the opposi-

tion, the arrest of thousands or the expulsion into exile – none of these are a reason to end membership. Even the invasion of Cyprus by NATO member Turkey in 1974 following the coup by the Greek colonels is apparently in line with the democratic founding consensus of the military alliance.

Now, one could dismiss this and refer to the *tempi passati*, the times gone by. But even in 2024, support for Islamist terrorism by *Erdogan's* autocracy is not in contradiction to NATO membership. NATO is not about democracy and the rule of law, but solely about geopolitical allegiance to the USA. Like an empire built on lies, NATO lives from this fairy tale. In schools and universities, these lies are part of the NATO education programme.

The myth of a community of values and human rights

"Our common values – individual freedom, human rights, democracy and the rule of law – unite us." This is how NATO presents itself as a community of values in its Strategic Concept 2022. However, the renowned *Brown University* in Rhode Island, USA, summarises that four and a half million people have died because of the wars waged by the USA and its allies in the past twenty years alone.

This cannot be reconciled with NATO's widely publicised self-image. NATO is not a community that protects human rights. On the contrary: NATO is a protective umbrella for the human rights violations of its members. And by no means only regarding the violation of social human rights under the dictatorship of massive armament. On the contrary, NATO pursues a policy of impunity against war crimes committed by its member states.

Anyone who, like the Australian journalist *Julian Assange*, dares to publicise these war crimes is tortured and threatened with 175 years in prison in the USA. There have been no serious interventions by other NATO governments to secure Assange's release. In hasty complicity, there is no criticism of the hegemon USA.

The "Afghan War Diary" collection of documents published by Assange in 2010 proves the existence of a secret US force, known as "Task Force 373", which is used to kill suspected Taliban leaders without legal recourse. The 300-strong elite unit was also stationed in the area controlled by the German Armed Forces in Afgh-

anistan. It was under the direct command of the US government and, according to reports published by the *Wikileaks* whistleblowing platform, also used internationally banned cluster bombs to kill and destroy indiscriminately.

On 11 January 2002, the USA set up a prison camp at the illegally occupied Guantánamo Bay naval base in Cuba. *Amnesty International* writes: "Many of the approximately 780 people who have since been deliberately detained there outside of any judicial control have suffered the most serious human rights violations before or during their detention – including torture and enforced disappearances. To this day, torture survivors in Guantánamo are held indefinitely without adequate medical care, charges or a fair trial."

Human rights have a very low priority for NATO. This can also be seen in the choice of alliances by NATO members. For example, the USA, the UK and Germany are arming the dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, which is beheading opposition members by the dozen and whose Crown Prince *Mohammed bin Salman* probably personally gave the order to dismember the Washington Post journalist *Jamal Khashoggi* in the Saudi Arabian Consulate General in Istanbul.

Rhetorically, NATO remains antithetically bound to its practice. NATO's strategic concept for 2022 states: "We will strengthen our unity, cohesion and solidarity by building on the enduring transatlantic bond between our nations and the strength of our shared democratic values." In view of the close alliances with dictators, autocrats and violators of international law, this self-assurance looks like a bad joke.

This hypocrisy is accompanied by double standards: In its strategic concept of 20 June 2022, NATO accuses Russia of committing "repeated violations of international humanitarian law" in Ukraine. While NATO uses this as an additional justification for its proxy war against Russia, it supports Israel in its obvious viola-

tions of international humanitarian law in Gaza and assures the country of its full solidarity.

With its veto in the UN Security Council, the USA is preventing any resolution in favour of an immediate ceasefire until the end of March. Without the arms supplies from the NATO states USA, Germany and Great Britain, this war would not be possible.

This double standard of the West is being increasingly criticised in the Global South. The human rights rhetoric of NATO states is seen there as purely instrumental to conceal or enforce their own geopolitical interests. NATO appears to be the guardian organisation of a deeply unjust world order with neo-colonial tendencies. This is demonstrated not least by the fact that, in the economic war against Russia, NATO members try to impose their own policies on third countries such as China, Turkey or the United Arab Emirates with so-called secondary sanctions in violation of their sovereignty.

The myths of NATO distort our view of reality. To find a way out of the current crisis, they need to be exposed. Today, 75 years after its foundation, the military pact is driving the world closer to the brink of a third world war than ever before with its global expansion and confrontations.

The critical examination of the current actions of the alliance as well as its crimes in the past should create the conditions for thinking about alternatives. Alternatives to a NATO that relies solely on deterrence, armament and confrontation – and thus jeopardises the very existence of peaceful coexistence.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

This text is an extract from the authors new book "Die NATO. Eine Abrechnung mit dem Wertebündnis" [The Nato. A reckoning with the alliance of values]. Westend. 128 pages. Reprinted with the kind permission of the author.

