WBGU

German Advisory Council on Global Change

Security:

What we need to talk about

The tone of interactions between states is becoming harsher; multilateral cooperation is being replaced by bilateral deals; 'might is right' is the new watchword. Environmental policy and international cooperation are under pressure. At the same time, less and less attention is being paid to scientific findings in political decision making. How can we avoid losing sight of the goal of sustainable and socially just development worldwide? What can be done to promote security and peace worldwide? What role should Germany and the European Union play?

Sustainability in times of global upheaval

Just ten years after the global community passed two international milestones for sustainability by creating the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement, the tide has turned. The rules-based international order is under threat – and social-polarization processes and political autocratization worldwide are further exacerbating the situation. 'Digitally empowered totalitarianism' – described by the WBGU as dystopian in 2019 and characterized by massive inequalities, elite rule, total surveillance, loss of freedom and environmental destruction – has developed into a real threat to liberal democracies faster than feared. New geopolitical and military tensions are emerging, while climate change and ecosystem destruction continue, in some cases with irreversible consequences (WBGU, 2023, 2024).

With Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine – in violation of international law – military security and autonomy are becoming increasingly important for Europe, especially since the transatlantic alliance, which was believed to be stable, has begun to falter. At the same time, anti-democratic, far-right parties and groups are gaining popularity – also in Europe. Against this backdrop, how can we work constructively towards a future that is worth living for all people? What are the prospects for social resilience and agency beyond defence against immediate military threats? What can be the basis for joint action for Europe and especially the EU in the future? What options are available to liberal democracies under pressure from internal division and external threat? What vision of security, peace and sustainability are we striving for in Germany and Europe?

The WBGU is currently working on the topic of integrated security and sustainability and would like to raise a number of questions for discussion. They are based on two observations:

> **National security and global sustainability are mutually dependent**

The only security concept that can be successful in the long term is an integrated one that encompasses not only direct protection against war and violence but also the worldwide protection of natural resources – such as the climate and biodiversity – as well as global justice, social cohesion and peace.

> **Europe must bolster its ability to act if it is to stand up for common values both internally and externally**

Only if Europe actively maintains and strengthens the resilience of its democracies will it be able to bring together and secure freedom and the rule of law, equality and the separation of powers, individualism and tolerance, prosperity and environmental protection.

1

Security risk: climate, biodiversity, pollution

Environmental crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution continue apace, destroying habitats, endangering health and destabilizing economic activities and societies (IPCC, 2022; IPBES, 2019). They pave the way for pandemics, trigger migration and conflicts of interest, even wars, and threaten security worldwide. There must not be any further delays when it comes to solving the environmental crises. Restoring natural ecosystems is needed to secure humanity's life-support systems.

› How can the destruction of nature and climate change be perceived as threats to national security, the economy and health, and be addressed with top priority? How can we overcome the backlog in this area? How can we remove the barriers that exist at the political, economic, social and individual level?

2

Democratic ability to act and technological concentration of power

Democratic societies are becoming increasingly dependent on networked technologies and digital applications that are beyond their control. Tech companies and digital platforms exert great influence over the economy and society. This involves great concentrations of capital which, coupled with their control over data and the information derived from it, enable them to exert political influence, even across national borders. The potential and risks of artificial intelligence are beginning to emerge. Inadequately regulated technology development and use in these areas favours monopolies, with the result that individual players control relevant new infrastructures. If there is no democratically legitimized containment of these developments, then security, sustainability and democracy itself are at risk.

› How can we prevent democratic structures from being threatened by the growing concentration of technological power and capital? How can liberal democracies maintain and expand their capacity to act? How can we ensure that technological development is geared towards the global common good as outlined by the 2030 Agenda?

3

Digital sovereignty

Access to reliable information is fundamental for responsible and informed decisions, intact democracies and sustainability transformations that are fully supported by society. Disinformation campaigns, i.a. in social media, the manipulation of data and data provision, and cyber attacks also influence public opinion in Europe and have an impact on elections. They undermine people's trust in information, evidence-based science and democratic processes. Data misuse, including misuse by internationally active companies and state actors, is becoming a growing danger. Sovereignty over digital infrastructures, data, platforms and the rules that apply to them, as well as their enforcement, should therefore be a top priority for democratic societies and states.

› How can the spread of disinformation be curbed? How can access to reliable information be improved? Should democratic societies create a public-service digital infrastructure to ensure their digital sovereignty?

4

Freedom of research, teaching and the press

The explicit hostility of extremist political movements and governments towards science jeopardizes the availability of reliable data, information and findings. It undermines trust in the knowledge base for sustainability transformations and redefines what is socially acceptable to think and say. The independence of research and teaching, and freedom of expression and thought, are undermined not only by the direct intimidation and public discrediting of academics, but also by forms of self-censorship that take place beforehand. The same applies to critical journalism. However, a truthful, critical and free exchange of views is the basis for an inclusive, constructive and fact-based social debate on the challenges of our time. The WBGU (2011) has described the transformation to sustainability as a 'societal search process that should be supported by experts'.

› How can science and free journalism be systematically protected and promoted? How can trust in science be preserved or restored? What role does education play? How can a broad, forward-looking social discourse be facilitated?

Societal polarization

The transformation to more sustainability has been, and still is, sometimes seen as an elite project. Apart from powerful veto players who see their economic interests threatened by sustainability transformations, many people are privately unconvinced of the necessity, fairness or effectiveness of the corresponding measures. Economic and social inequality, as well as fears of social decline, contribute to the polarization. Furthermore, trust and empathy are lost when unscrupulous behaviour, dishonesty and intransigence become increasingly common at the highest political level.

› Have social aspects of climate and biodiversity policy been neglected too much in the past? What role do communication and culture play? How can broad participation in sustainability transformations be strengthened? How can structures be created that strengthen people's capacity to act and give them hope and optimism for the future?

Prosperity and finances

Because of existing and escalating geopolitical tensions and open conflicts, growing sums of money are currently being invested in defence and arms. Geopolitical rivalries are leading to an increasing prioritization of military and economic nationalism. As a result, investment in sustainability transformations is already declining – for example for the implementation of the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Rising debt levels and the associated interest payments are making the situation even more difficult in low-income countries. Europe also faces the question of how it can secure its prosperity in the current global political situation – as a basis and resource for internal and external security as well as for sustainability transformations.

› How can we make sure that sustainability receives sufficient financial support? What can an international financial architecture look like that channels financial resources into productive and sustainable investments? How can society's wealth be distributed more fairly both nationally and internationally? How can low-income countries be relieved of some of their debt so that they have funds left to invest in sustainable development?

Raw materials and trade

The global race to secure access to raw materials is intensifying. This dynamic applies particularly to raw materials that are needed for digitalization and the transition to renewable energies. It is unclear how to prevent increasing negative environmental impacts, economic exploitation and threats to human rights along supply chains in this context. Growing nationalism involving transnational claims to power is jeopardizing a socially just energy transition and environmental protection worldwide.

› How can the race for raw materials be contained in such a way that it does not put global sustainable development at risk? To what extent can our dependence on raw materials be reduced, for example through recycling, alternative materials or efficiency and sufficiency strategies? What forms of collaboration should be strengthened or newly created? How can supply chains and trade relations be organized in such a way that the populations of resource-rich countries receive a reliable and fair share of the restructured value chains?

Rules-based international order

A rules-based and values-oriented international order that promotes the 2030 Agenda and focuses on cooperation rather than demarcation is at risk of further erosion in view of growing nationalist tendencies. At present, there is little hope that free trade and existing military alliances, global environmental agreements, diplomatic relations and cooperation agreements will be enough to ensure stability, peace, health and prosperity for all. A new, self-critical view that takes conflicts of interest, power relations and international injustices seriously is urgently needed – especially in order to restore international trust and to boost a peaceful, sustainability-orientated transnational ability to act.

› What narratives and policy instruments, alliances and forms of independence can make Germany and Europe constructive players for a sustainable future? Which economic- and climate-policy approaches are suitable? How can Europe regain trust in the world?

9

Intergovern-mental cooperation

Alliances between states and security alliances that were thought to be stable are currently being questioned. Formats such as the G7 and G20 face the challenge of increasingly divergent interests and are continuously losing their ability to act. This also applies to international institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization, as well as multilateral environmental agreements. New intergovernmental, often topic-specific formats are emerging to advance common concerns in the interests of global sustainability. Furthermore, selected alliances are being expanded in a targeted manner, e.g. with China in the fields of energy or climate. The European security architecture is being reorganized.

> What intergovernmental formats need to be developed to encourage cooperation in the interests of global sustainability? With which countries and in which regions should alliances be developed? What should a European security architecture look like that also keeps global sustainability on the agenda?

10

Sub-state coalitions and alliances

Even though many countries are currently giving a lower priority to sustainability, many players around the world continue to champion various aspects of sustainability. However, their room for manoeuvre is becoming increasingly limited. Sub-state coalitions and alliances of actors dedicated to the common goal of sustainable development in the sense of the long-term well-being of people and nature are of great importance. In addition to cooperation between civil-society organizations, this also involves cooperation between cities and regions, as well as scientific collaborations.

> What coalitions and alliances beyond state alliances can contribute to stability and the continuation of the sustainability transformation? How can players worldwide be strengthened to further promote climate and biodiversity protection? How can the critical and active civil society be protected?

11

Future of the global community

Established multilateral agreements and the institutional landscape of the United Nations that supports them are under great pressure. The USA has again turned its back on the Paris Agreement and the UN Human Rights Council, distanced itself from the 2030 Agenda and announced that it will significantly reduce its contributions to bilateral and multilateral cooperation – and even discontinue them entirely in some areas. It is not yet possible to predict whether and how this will affect support for international agreements and the willingness of other countries to cooperate. Furthermore, blackmail and ruthless trade policies, instead of rule-based interaction, have once again become forms of intergovernmental negotiations.

> How can we create peaceful, economically just and sustainability-orientated cooperation within the global community for the future? What should a post-2030 sustainability agenda look like that generates orientation and community worldwide and is actually implemented?

Literature
IPCC (2022): Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability; IPBES (2019): Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services; WBGU (2011): A Social Contract for Sustainability; WBGU (2019): Towards our Common Digital Future; WBGU (2023): Healthy living on a healthy planet; WBGU (2024): Water in a heated world.