

# Conference Report

Bonn Symposium 2023

sef:

## Integrated, inclusive, in partnership?

Germany's National Security Strategy and international co-operation

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For the first time in its history, Germany has published a National Security Strategy (NSS). Responding to the challenges of today's multipolar world order, the strategy adopts a holistic approach to security, emphasizing the significance of interrelating issues ranging from climate change, over food security, energy supply, migration, to conflict prevention. Indeed, the strategy opens the door to more cross-sector cooperation, however, it only offers limited guidance on how to implement set priorities. This is particularly evident looking at challenges and opportunities related to shaping relations with countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia – all of which are only scarcely mentioned in the NSS. The Bonn Symposium 2023 focused precisely on this gap: What is the impact of the security strategy on Germany's international cooperation? How do

countries in the Global South, especially in Africa, perceive the strategy, and what are their expectations towards Germany? How can and should Germany shape its relations with these countries in a partnership-based and sustainable manner? Up to 100 representatives from politics, academia, and civil society, from Germany, other European countries, and Africa, engaged in lively discussions on these central issues at the Bonn Symposium 2023, held at the Deutsche Welle. The event was hosted by the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:), in collaboration with the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) at the University of Duisburg-Essen, and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg.



Panelists of the Bonn Symposium 2023 and the hosts of sef:, INEF & IFSH

## Central Insights

The Bonn Symposium 2023 highlighted the imperative for a comprehensive and flexible security strategy that transcends the logic of defence, and adequately addresses the needs of Germany's partner countries. A key challenge identified was overcoming the conceptual vagueness of the NSS and transforming it from an „empty vessel“ into an effective instrument. The discussions repeatedly pointed to the crisis of multilateralism, the imperative of adapting to geopolitical changes, and the necessity of cooperation, particularly regarding Germany's present and future role in the international system. The discussions emphasized the need to understand the NSS as an ongoing, collaborative process that must involve various actors in further shaping and implementing the strategy. However, participants from the Global South criticised the NSS for its introspective focus and as, inter alia, „German naval gazing“. To genuinely protect its own interests, Germany must adequately address the individual contexts, interests, and perspectives of African countries. It therefore must not only refine its strategy but also implement it cooperatively, in the spirit of true partnerships on eye level.

### Mere Logic of Defence and German Naval-Gazing?

Kicking off the symposium, Professor Dr Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Director of the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), provided insights into the NSS in her keynote. She connected the NSS' core motives - robustness, resilience, and sustainability - with the challenges of climate change, social polarization, and the crisis of multilateralism. Hornidge argued that these intertwined crises present a complex landscape that demand a nuanced and balanced approach. While acknowledging the NSS as a commendable starting point, she highlighted that its inherent logic still aligns more with defence instead of cooperation. She emphasized that in an era marked by shifting alliances and volatile geopolitical power dynamics, cooperation is crucial for Germany's security. Professor Hornidge subsequently suggested that partnerships should be shaped more specifically around themes in the



Close to 100 conference participants at Deutsche Welle, Bonn. Commentary to the Keynote by Dr Ottilia Maunganidze, Institute of Security Studies (ISS)

future; peace, framed as a global good, could serve as a potential focus for joint efforts.

Dr Ottilia Maunganidze, Head of Special Projects in the Office of the Executive Director at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), in her commentary on Professor Hornidge's keynote, urged Germany to end its navel-gazing. She explained that Germany's security is closely linked to the security of other states, and thus it must be flexible in responding to the changing and increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape. Partnerships should be based on a solid foundation, yet flexible enough to adapt to varying contexts. This would enable the formation of alliances with states that have historically held opinions significantly distinct from Germany's. In the interest of its own security, Germany relies on local partnerships outside Europe. The real test of these partnerships will be whether they are characterized by a „coming together of different worlds“ or a „clash of logics.“ Ultimately, the NSS will be evaluated on the grounds of its implementation in the global context, particularly within uncertain power structures.

### The Security Strategy: Empty Vessel or Living Document?

The Bonn Symposium addressed the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape, including the crisis of multilateralism, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and ongoing conflicts. These complexities, combined with Germany's goal to preserve and strengthen its leading role in the multilateral system, call for a coherent, but above all implementable security strategy. However, it seems to be this very complexity that renders a detailed strategy intangible. The first panel focused on this dilemma and addressed the ambigui-



ties and potentials of the German security strategy.

Dr Jörn Grävingsholt, Head of Politics at Bread for the World, initially criticized the NSS as an „empty vessel“, whose effectiveness depended on its specific formulation. He welcomed the strategy’s integration of Germany’s security with humanitarian aid and development cooperation. Yet, he expressed not only hope but uncertainty, as many aspects, particularly regarding the definition and implementation of strategic goals and how to handle conflicts of interest, remain unclear. The current billion-euro gap in the state budget would further add to these uncertainties. He stressed the importance of Germany’s credibility and expressed concern about a discrepancy between

Faith Maberera, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Global Dialogue, positively assessed the ambiguities of the NSS, highlighting the need for flexible „strategic manoeuvring“. She also noted the challenges in measuring the influence and effectiveness of such an openly formulated strategy. Maberera emphasized the need to pay more attention to the aspect of geopolitics in the NSS, especially in light of the „Zeitenwende“, stressing the urgency for Germany to redefine its role in the EU and its strategic culture.

Dr Jannie Lilja, Director of Studies at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), also emphasized Germany’s need for intense engagement with the implementation of the NSS. She raised concerns about the intention to implement the strategy without additional spending and criticised the vagueness of key goals such as „freedom“ and „democracy“ outlined in the strategy, advocating for greater clarity and detail. She suggested that similarly to the development of the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy, the NSS should evolve and be implemented through contributions from various partners, with embassies and missions playing a key role.



Panel 1: from left to right: Dr Elke Löbel (BMZ), Faith Marbera (IGD), Dr Jannie Lilja (SIPRI), Dr Jörn Grävingsholt (Brot für die Welt)

Germany’s intentions and its actual actions, emphasizing the need for a „proactive strategy“ rather than merely „following“ trends and crises.

In response, Dr Elke Löbel, Head of the Directorate of displacement and migration; crisis prevention and management at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), argued that the NSS should not be misunderstood neither as a comprehensive and complete strategy nor as a concrete action plan. Instead, its success would significantly depend on the ongoing political shaping process and its implementation. In thus far, Dr Löbel described the security strategy as a „living document“ and necessary starting point for a transition process. It is deliberately formulated broader and focuses on an expanded security concept that connects with that of the United Nations and the sustainable development goals. The strategy provides anchor points, such as the inclusion of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDP-Nexus), to develop long-term solutions for crises through collaboration between humanitarian aid, development cooperation, and peace promotion. Ultimately, Dr Löbel defended the NSS, instead of an „empty vessel“, the NSS must rather be understood as a ship steered by experienced sailors navigating through troubled waters.

### Conceptual „Fluffiness“? – African Perspectives on the National Security Strategy

Overcoming the German introspective focus, as initially criticized by Otilia Maunganidze, calls for looking beyond Germany’s own perspective. Thus, the second panel addressed the characteristics of security strategies in a broader fashion, as well as African perspectives on the German strategy.

Anselm Vogler, researcher at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), first shared insights from his comparative research. His research reveals that security strategies, especially since September 11, 2001, have undergone a significant evolution, shifting their focus more towards issues such as terrorism and organized crime. While many strategies address a common pool of themes, there is „a clear difference in how the same themes are linked with various implications“ observable. For instance, some countries, including Germany, take a holistic view of combating climate change, while others focus more on its symptoms, such as displacement.

Professor Dr Kwesi Aning, Director at the Faculty of Academic Affairs & Research at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), observed that a certain „fluffiness“ is inherent to most security strategies, indicating a lack of concretization. This is evident in the German NSS, for example, in the formulation of equal partnerships. While Germany emphasizes this as a goal, it had been less willing to genuinely listen to its African partners. Unlike the Ghanaian strategy, which recognizes that Ghana’s security is directly linked to the security of its West

African neighbours, the German strategy primarily viewed the world through a „German lens.“ This perspective became also evident in the framing of partners as „fragile“ or „failed“ states, making equal partnerships practically impossible from the start. Against this background, the guiding motif of preserving the rules-based international system to Aning almost seems like a cliché, at a minimum a refusal to acknowledge a radically changing international order marked by flexible and often opportunistic ad-hoc alliances.

Oyewole Oginni, researcher at the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), built on Dr Aning’s critique, highlighting a lack of adaptation to the specific contexts and interests of individual African countries. Unlike China’s approach, including humanitarian aid and investments that would more accurately address Africa’s needs, German engagement, according to Oginni, was mainly unilaterally beneficial and primarily focused on restricting migration. Additionally, regarding the absence of state structures in parts of Africa, Oginni raised the question of how



Moderator and host Dr Marcus Kaplan (sef.) together with Oyewole Oginni (BICC)

the principle of maintaining the rules-based international order reconciles with the political reality of sometimes unavoidable interaction and cooperation with non-state actors.

### The National Security Strategy Between Aspiration and Reality

Dr Florian Krampe, Director of the Climate Change and Risk Programme at SIPRI, stressed the inseparable link between climate change and security. He urged countries like Germany and Sweden to intensify their efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change, overcome silo thinking, and face the challenge of financing climate measures, both in mitigation and adaptation. He particularly emphasized leveraging regional expertise and institutions,

highlighting the involvement of embassies and the roles of the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in climate-related work. He noted many untapped potentials, especially in finding ways to further promote regionalization



Faith Mabera, Institute of Global Dialogue (IGD)

and regional partnerships. Ultimately, he pointed out that national security strategies should best be understood as „guiding documents, not step-by-step guides,“ allowing for flexible adaptation to conditions in different countries.

Dr Kudakwashe Chirambwi, founder of the Peace, Leadership and Conflict Transformation Programme at the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe, sharply criticized the NSS as self-centred and as exclusively focused on German interests. Echoing and amplifying previous speakers, he observed that Europe, particularly Germany, was no longer necessarily the preferred partner of African countries, as many African governments preferred China. However, Germany has yet to recognize this shift. Chirambwi also criticized that African states were not consulted in the development of the German strategy and suggested that this left the impression that Germany might be trying to strengthen its own security at Africa’s expense. He further called for a redefinition of partnerships in the NSS that respects and adapts to different leadership styles in Africa.

Regarding integrated peace engagement, Melanie Hauenstein, Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Lebanon, argued that the key lies in creating resilient, cooperative institutions and adopting a human rights-based approach. Institutions must be enabled to operationalize the NSS and bring together interests across sectors, including civil society and the private sector. She noted that in the field, it frequently remained unclear what long-term objectives Germany is pursuing, or how it integrates its military efforts



with humanitarian aid and long-term economic cooperation. Instead, her impression is that various measures are often carried out in parallel, leading to inefficiencies. She suggested better coordination of different instruments and measures and promoting cooperation among them to avoid long-term contradictions in objectives. Specifically, she proposed more precise involvement of embassies in strategic decisions regarding resource allocation to identify needs and increase efficiency. In practice, the implementation of the HDP Nexus mentioned by Dr Löbel appears not to consistently function as envisioned by the BMZ and the NSS.

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## Wrap Up

In his closing remarks, Martin Vehrenberg, Deputy Managing Director at AGIAMONDO, summarized the key insights of the day. He positively noted the NSS's comprehensive approach to security, encompassing a wide range of political areas and topics. However, to Vehrenberg, a major weakness is the insufficient engagement of the NSS in public debate, its lack of specificity regarding objectives and commitments, and the overall absence of a clear implementation plan. To achieve coherence, he emphasized the need for context-specific strategies, especially on the inter-ministerial level. He highlighted the importance of ongoing dialogue about the NSS; such dialogue is crucial in „times of competing political agendas, multiple crises, and budget freezes.“ Ultimately, the National Security Strategy provides a starting point from which discussions must now continue and, hopefully, lead to concrete actions.



Martin Vehrenberg, Advisory Board to the Federal Government for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding, draws conclusions