

Keeping the 'Rule of Law' Alive

by GWYNNE DYER

Last Tuesday there was a vote in the Bundestag, the lower house of the German parliament, that may have changed the course of history. When the vote came out 'Yes?', you could feel the tectonic plates shift. Germany has voted to rearm.

In an ideal world, disarming would have been the better choice, but we are not in that world.

The United States has changed sides and Donald Trump is about to deliver a besieged Ukraine that he has deliberately starved of weapons into the hands of his good friend, the invader Vladimir Putin.

The Bundestag's decision was not just about Ukraine. It is about the 'rule of law', which can be summed up in one sentence: henceforward, no country shall expand its border by force. Borders may be 'unfair' and they are almost always the result of past violence, but you must live within them in peace forever (unless you can negotiate voluntary changes).

What kind of fools would try to impose such an extreme and idealistic rule on the world? Only the survivors of the Second World War, who had seen 50 to 70 million people die in a war that was basically about territory, as most wars have been throughout history. And at the end of that war, in 1945, they had watched the first cities die under nuclear weapons.

So yes, those fools put their new idea about freezing the frontiers and allowing no more border changes by force into Article 2.4 of the United Nations Charter in 1945, and you know what? It worked.

Not everywhere, all the time, but no sovereign country of significant size has been destroyed by war since 1945. Nuclear weapons were used twice in August 1945, but not again in the eighty years since. The death toll from wars all over the planet has fallen from around 10 million people in 1945 to a couple of hundred thousand a year in the early 2020s.

That is the remarkable accomplishment that almost nobody is grateful for, or even aware of. It is why most children in the world have grown up in peace for the past three generations, even though the media persistently show you mostly images of the unfortunate minority who don't.

It is what is at stake when Donald Trump, chasing the Nobel Peace Prize and ignorant of history, tries to impose a 'peace deal' that will give a large chunk of Ukraine to the Russian ruler. Putin formally recognised Ukraine's border in 2003, but he is now trying to change it permanently by force.

Putin doesn't care about the 'rule of law' because he thinks he can profit by ignoring it. Trump doesn't even understand the rules that were established in 1945 or why they matter to the world. But most of the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) both know and care, because their continent was leveled by the last great war.

They have given up on the United States but they desperately want to prevent the destruction of the 'rule of law.' Trump is promoting an internationally recognised partition of Ukraine by a victorious Russia, so he is actually their enemy (although they will never say so publicly). And they must create a new alliance without the United States to stop Trump's 'peace.'

That is why the vote in Germany's Bundestag on Tuesday was so important. Creating a European mini-NATO (no US, but perhaps Canada and Turkey) will require major rearmament, which will take a lot of money - and Germany (84 million people) is by far the biggest European country in the new proto-alliance.

The new German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, is willing to spend the money, but the German constitution contains an amendment, passed during the last financial crisis (2009), that severely restricts emergency spending by the federal government.

He needed a two-thirds majority in the Bundestag to kill that amendment, but the far left and the hard right in Germany are pro-Russian so the Tuesday vote was going to be tricky. In the event, he got the votes he needed and the plates moved. The money will be there, from Germany and about 30 other countries.

Nobody imagines that Ukraine, starved for arms for the past three years and hugely outnumbered, can recapture its lost territories at this point, but it is not on the brink of defeat as Kremlin and White House propaganda insist.

With adequate arms and money from its supporters in Europe and overseas, Ukraine may still be able to fight the Russians to a standstill and achieve a ceasefire that does not give away its territory permanently. That's not the kind of objective you can boast about in public, but it would keep the rule of law more or less alive.