Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the budget debate in the German Bundestag

2016-09-07

Fellow members of this House,

There’s a particular image I can't get out of my mind, and I imagine we all feel the same way. I'm talking about the photo of little Omran, a five-year-old boy who has just escaped from a missile attack in Aleppo. He doesn’t know yet that his brother is dying. He looks dazed. Sitting on a red seat in an ambulance, he almost appears to be paralysed. Still in shock and apparently not in pain, his hand touches his blood-smeared face. This photo moves us – and probably not only because of the story it tells of one boy, but also because we know and suspect that it stands for the fate of thousands of children and hundreds of thousands of civilians who have lost their lives in Syria’s seemingly never-ending civil war.

Moreover, this photo also calls on politicians to take action. We cannot allow empathy or indignation to be the full extent of our response. Nor can we allow ourselves to be swayed by despair, even if five or ten attempts to bring about a ceasefire have already failed. It is difficult – and I, more than anyone, am aware of this – but we must not and we will not accept that the dying and suffering continue into a sixth year of civil war. To all those who always knew that the efforts in Geneva to prevent a humanitarian disaster are worthless and doomed to failure, I want to say that it would be irresponsible not to try or to break off the negotiations simply because they are difficult. That is not acceptable.

Fellow members of this House, perhaps the photo of Omran also urges us to take action beyond Syria. Perhaps it is a symbol of a crisis-ridden world in which security and stability apparently can no longer be taken for granted, a symbol of a world that demands that we do more to uphold peace and to restore it where it no longer exists – in Syria and the Middle East, but also here in Europe.

We are not shirking responsibility. We took on the Chairmanship of the

OSCE

this year precisely because the situation is difficult. You saw that I invited my

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counterparts just last week to a place of great historical importance for the post-war order, that is, to Potsdam. I would like to brief you on my experiences at this meeting.

I think that although we held a six-hour debate, my colleagues left Potsdam with something else to the fore of their minds. When all forty of us foreign ministers walked across the Glienicke Bridge, which many people see as a symbol of division, mistrust and the fate of many individuals, in the evening, this left a far more lasting impression than any speech. Last week, the message from Potsdam was that we must do everything we can to ensure that the alienation between eastern and western Europe does not lead once again to a division into opposing camps or even to a threat to peace. No one understood this message as a return to the dark days of the 20th century. I think everyone understood that what this place stands for is extremely relevant at a time when the very question of war and peace has returned to our European continent following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in violation of international law and the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

We must recognise and acknowledge the fact that the security situation has changed in Europe and that the feeling of threat has increased not only in the Baltic states, but also in some eastern European countries. I think we made sensible decisions on these matters at the

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Summit in Warsaw, following difficult debates in the run-up to the meeting.

But apparently it is also equally necessary to remind people time and again that our defence strategy is always based on two pillars, that is, on deterrence and dialogue. But at times the problem is that deterrence is always tangible, while this is rarely the case for dialogue or the offer to talk. That is why I would like to add the following to what we discussed in the past: we need to find ways to think again in terms of common security in Europe in order to avoid escalations and to restore predictability.

This is the background to our proposal that we focus on arms control to a greater extent in Europe once again. I have received a great deal of positive feedback on this suggestion. What we need to do now is to start talking to each other. We don’t know if this will work out in the end – but it would be irresponsible not to try.

Unfortunately, the threat of new rifts is something we are not only facing when it comes to East and West. We also clearly face this threat within the European Union. Brexit is making us experience something that I myself and perhaps hardly anyone here in this chamber would have believed possible at the start of this electoral term three years ago, namely that a large and important country, a close partner of ours, would vote by a majority to leave the European Union. This is bitter. It is bitter for the United Kingdom. It is bitter for us. And it is

bitter for Europe as a whole, even if the long-term effects can perhaps not yet even be foreseen at the moment.

There is no doubt that the absolute priority now is to keep Europe together. However – and I can assure you of this after our first talks – opinion is extremely divided on how this should be tackled. Some say that now, after Brexit, this is the time for the next bold step towards integration. But others say that it is time to roll the whole thing back and start amending the treaties. The fear is that this will lead us to the middle of nowhere.

That is why my French counterpart Jean-Marc Ayrault and I tried to describe a way forward based on the assumption that people in Europe don't want lengthy back-room debates in Brussels, but rather expect Europe to show it is capable of taking action – and of doing so where there are expectations, but where we and Europe did not come up with the goods in the past. This goes for security and foreign policy. And of course, it also applies to our approach to displacement and migration and to economic, growth and currency issues. Anyone who spent their summer holidays in the Mediterranean and talked about politics will have realised that youth unemployment is still the big issue there.

That is why we tried to put forward proposals on this group of issues in a joint paper. I very much hope to see a common stance based on reason at the next

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Foreign Ministers Meeting in Bratislava.

Fellow members of this House, while we're on the subject of rifts in Europe, allow me to say a few words about Turkey. There are two completely opposite perceptions of the same reality. Turkey has the impression that we never took the attempted coup seriously, that we didn't show our sympathy openly and even that some sources in Germany in particular had alleged that the coup was staged from the beginning.

Recently, after my first meeting with my colleagues from Turkey since the attempted coup, I issued a statement in Bratislava in which I said that perhaps we really didn't make it sufficiently clear that this attempted coup was indeed an outrageous attack against the institutions of democracy. Perhaps we did not succeed in getting the message across in public that we have great respect for the resistance shown by the Turkish people and that naturally we are saddened by the deaths of those who lost their lives in the attempted coup. In this regard, we stand firmly at Turkey's side at all times. It was necessary to say this and I think we can underline that we mean it seriously.

But conversely – and I also said this during the talks with my Turkish colleagues in Bratislava – not every critical question from Europe can be immediately seen as arrogance or ignorance about the events and dangers in Turkey. Naturally, this attempted coup must have political

and legal consequences. And naturally, those responsible must be held to account. However, our expectation that rule-of-law standards be upheld must not and cannot be seen in Turkey as a lack of respect.

That is why I am glad that a first meeting took place just this morning between the Council of Europe and the Turkish Foreign Minister, at which the Council of Europe made an explicit offer to help prepare the forthcoming court cases.

No matter how many sources of friction there are – and these will continue – I believe that the phase of talking about each other, during which we only spoke via microphones and cameras, must now gradually be replaced by a phase in which we talk to each other again, express criticism, and argue openly and honestly.

I think we should keep in mind that we in Germany do not ultimately have the power to decide for ourselves whether or not Turkey is important to us. I would like to remind people once again that Turkey is a key country for us. I do not only say that because of the 2.5 million refugees living in Turkey or because there is an agreement on refugees with Turkey. Whoever else stands at this lectern today and says something about Syria, Iraq or Libya must know that ultimately none of these conflicts can be solved unless we have Turkey on board.

That is why I strongly advise that we be critical where necessary, but do not act as if we could somehow do without relations with Turkey because there are contentious issues. Turkey is needed – and we need it too in our endeavours to bring about peace in the Middle East.

Fellow members of this House, you see that the crises continued during the summer recess. In some ways, they may have returned with even greater intensity. From our point of view, crisis diplomacy will definitely remain the bread and butter of our foreign policy work.

This goes for Syria – I already said a few words about that – and it goes for eastern Ukraine. I will travel to Ukraine once again next week with my French counterpart and talk to my colleagues there about whether and when we will meet again in the Normandy format.

We increased our support in Mali under truly difficult conditions there and in Colombia, my dear Tom Koenigs, we were able to provide some help in ensuring that the peace process not only made progress, but that a good course will now be embarked upon thanks to the signing of the peace agreement. Thank you very much indeed!

In conclusion, I would like to say that when we meet again to discuss the budget and the talks go into greater detail, then it will not always be a matter of discussing the really big solutions or the ultimate idea on ending the war in Syria. Instead, many small steps are usually involved.

In recent years, we have succeeded in not just thinking about the really big solutions, which might have failed, but rather in looking at the entire cycle of a conflict, ranging from humanitarian aid and crisis prevention to stabilisation and, above all, the expansion of our mediation capacities, which are urgently needed. I would like to thank the entire Bundestag most sincerely for ensuring that our abilities in this area have increased significantly in the past two years in particular. Thank you very much.

It is also thanks to your support that we have become the world’s third-largest donor of humanitarian aid. The crisis in Syria, which I talked about earlier on, is obviously the priority. To give you a specific example, aid from Germany made it possible to provide supplies for 110,000 people in Deir ez-Zor via air drops. Outside Syria, we are naturally concentrating on providing support in the neighbouring countries, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon.

I think all of us know that people will only remain hopeful that they will be able to return to their homeland some time in the future if we improve the opportunities for them in the region. That is why stabilisation is important once places of residence have been defined and once we have possibly even liberated areas from ISIS, from Daesh. We are working on stabilisation in order to create a basic standard of living conditions that enables people to stay and to create them as quickly as possible. I believe this has been working well in recent times. Ramadi in Iraq is one example. Thanks to stabilisation support, around 90 percent of the people returned to the almost completely destroyed city and did not move between the fronts in Iraq on the way to Turkey or elsewhere.

This will remain the most important part of our work in the coming months and next year. Not only will we face up to our responsibilities, we will also send a message that we are willing to take on responsibility in the international arena and to work on a rules-based international order. This is why we will run for a seat on the

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Security Council for the 2019-2020 term. I will ask for your support on this.

Thank you very much.

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