

Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to the German Bundestag in the budget debate

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16.05.2018 - Speech 

– verbatim report of proceedings –

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,
fellow members of this House,

We only need glance briefly at global events in the last few days and weeks, or perhaps even the last few hours, to realise that the global order we are familiar with is currently experiencing a fundamental shift, perhaps even on a tectonic scale. The basic principles of multilateralism and international law are being called into question. This holds true for the international trade system but also for open societies. We face major challenges on all sides. The institutional and legal framework which brought peace and prosperity to us Germans in the last 70 years is, as we speak, being redrawn.

Also in Europe, the tasks we face are huge. After almost ten years of consecutive crises, the European Union is heading for a critical juncture. Within the ~~EU (European Union)~~, given Brexit, the aftermath of the financial crisis, populism and nationalism, there are signs of erosion that need to be taken seriously. Beyond the ~~EU (European Union)~~, major actors such as Russia, China and unfortunately to a degree now also the United States threaten to divide the ~~EU (European Union)~~. Against this backdrop and at this time, we are working for a Europe that speaks with one voice on foreign policy, promotes international cooperation and convincingly makes the case for retaining a rules based international order. At this juncture, Europe must close the divide which others are opening up; including others whom we would not have expected to create dividing lines.

If we do not manage to do so, powers with a very different understanding of order will fill the void. That we need to prevent. That is the real European challenge we face and the one to which we need to rise. Without a Germany that is engaged in foreign and security policy, that strengthens Europe's role in the world and prevents dividing lines within Europe, we will not be able to meet the challenges.

Fellow members of this House, the three acute crises on our doorstep – in Iran, in Syria and last but not least in Ukraine – mean we have to play an active role. This is a role we have long been playing.

Take Syria, for example. War has now been raging there for more than seven years. Almost half a million people have lost their lives and millions have been forced to flee. Regrettably, nothing remains of the peace plan concluded in Geneva. On the contrary, the international community has split and as a result no shared political process has taken root. On one side, we have the Russians, Iranians and Turks meeting in Sochi or Astana and on the other side, as the Federal Chancellor pointed out earlier, a so called Small Group has been set up with representatives of the United States, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Both groups are trying to find solutions. But these solutions will only be found together. Germany was not at either negotiating table. That is why we have used all our foreign policy and diplomatic options in recent weeks to get back to the negotiating table to talk about Syria.

For me, this situation is not satisfactory. We received an invitation to the Syria donor conference in Brussels when it was about putting money on the table to finance humanitarian assistance. Incidentally, Germany again pledged more than one billion euros for the next few years to alleviate the need and suffering of the people, also in Syria's neighbouring countries. But if we do this and, what is more, on a larger scale than any other country, then I believe that gives us the right, and that needs to be the way we approach it, to sit at the negotiating tables when political solutions for the Syria conflict are being sought.

That is what we are doing now. Two weeks ago, we attended the Small Group meeting. There are good reasons for this. What we need to do now, ideally under the auspices of the United Nations with ~~UN~~ (United Nations) Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, is to bring the two formats back together and implement what was agreed in Geneva so long ago: a cease fire that is worthy of the name to finally guarantee humanitarian access to Syria, as well as constitutional reform to be sealed with a democratic election in which all Syrians can decide who is to govern them. We do not need a military solution in Syria. Such a solution would not bring peace. What we need is a political solution. It is good that Germany is back at the table seeking this solution.

Second example. Given other conflicts in the world, Ukraine is less in the global spotlight. Yet we have to admit that the situation in Ukraine is in no respect satisfactory. The annexation of Crimea remains in violation of international law. This is not an analysis that can change.

Nor can we give the impression that the passing of time will give the whole thing a degree of legitimacy. This is a challenge for us because we played an integral role in developing, negotiating and concluding the Minsk process in the so called Normandy format with the French, the Ukrainians and the Russians, spearheaded back then by Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Here, too, not much remains.

With regard to the whole discussion on our policy towards Russia, I would like to say that I was in Moscow last Thursday and told my colleague Lavrov the following: in Germany we want a dialogue – probably most people have different ideas on how this should shape up. But I do not want a dialogue for the sake of it, I want a dialogue that brings results.

The dialogue just isn't producing enough results. Thus in my talks with Mr Lavrov I asked that Russia come back to the negotiating table to relaunch the Minsk process and to seek political solutions. He agreed to this. Here, too, Germany will have its seat at the negotiating table. We have even brought the conflicting parties back to the table. And that is an achievement of German foreign policy.

The third example is Iran. This has already come up. This morning I attended the Committee on Foreign Affairs. We have agreed with our European partners that we are sticking to the agreement. Incidentally we have worked hard in recent weeks and months, together with the French and the British, in Washington, in London, in Paris and in Berlin, and fought for the United States to remain in the agreement.

I would like to outline why this is so important to us. It has got nothing to do with us somehow welcoming all that Iran is doing. On the contrary, we continue to reject the ballistic missile programme and the extremely negative role Iran is playing in Syria. But in the case of this agreement, we are talking quite simply about our own immediate security interests.

The non proliferation of nuclear weapons, and that is what the agreement is about, is in Germany's security policy interest. That is why we will do all we can, even without the United States, to ensure this agreement has a future. After all, I would rather have an agreement with scope for improvement in some points but which is the prerequisite for Iran not relaunching a nuclear weapons programme than have no agreement at all and as a result have no clue where we are heading. For me, that too, is responsible foreign policy.

Fellow members of this House, it is not just in these major conflicts that we are engaged in responsible foreign policy but, also at a preventive level, in many other places. This is precisely what we are doing for example in northern Iraq as we clear booby traps and mines in towns previously occupied by IS. We are also doing this when we help reintegrate former fighters in Somalia, when we support mediation between the conflicting parties in Yemen or help set up a police force based on the rule of law in Sahel countries. Germany is doing justice to its foreign policy responsibility in many places around the world, and not just with financing but also with personnel and, above all else, by engaging in the ongoing battle to seek political solutions and create lasting peace in the conflicts of our world, fellow members of this House.

The more other partners withdraw, the greater our responsibility will become. I also want to say that the election to the Security Council for the period 2019/2020 will take place on 8 June in the United Nations General Assembly. We want to use this opportunity to ensure our values are also represented in this body. We will not look on and do nothing while nationalists and populists try to turn back the clock. Now and in the future, a peaceful global order must be based not on the law of the strong, but on the strength of the law.

Thank you very much.

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