“An agenda for peace and security? Priorities for a social democratic foreign policy for the European Union and the United Nations.” Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung’s Tiergarten Conference

2019-11-28

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Foreign Minister

Heiko Maas

at the

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung’s Tiergarten

Conference

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When you ask football fans about some match their team played, it’s highly unlikely that they’ll tell you about just any old match. No, they will almost certainly tell you about the most memorable match their team ever played, the time it won a championship, or some other special occasion. In our case, Kurt, as natives of southwest Germany, we have to look far back into the annals of time, to the days when the

Fritz Walter

Stadium was still called the Betzenberg Stadium.

Psychologists call this “memory bias”. In other words, we remember particularly emotional moments and forget others.

And this type of selective memory does not only happen with football. When we talk here in Germany about the watershed period of 1989, we think about a time of joy in our history. We recall the peaceful revolution, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain.

Perhaps memory bias also plays a part in the fact that we overlooked another tectonic shift – one we are currently experiencing very intensely – for a long time.

And we overlooked it although there were certainly signs that things were headed this way.

As far back as 2013, the “Washington Post” ran the headline: “American isolationism just hit a 50-year high.” President Obama’s second term in office was just beginning.

An opinion poll had revealed that for the first time since the question was included in the survey in 1964, a majority of Americans believed that the US would be better off staying out of world affairs.

The 1990s and 2000s, which had been characterised by global engagement by the US and its allies in the Balkans, the Middle East and Afghanistan, were followed by restraint stipulated by President Obama. Some people spoke of greater realism in foreign policy.

And under President Trump, the entire world can now feel what “America First” means – including, and indeed above all, in international relations. Sanctions and tariffs have become the preferred instruments of US foreign policy. And despite all the strife at home in the US, there is often bipartisan consensus on these instruments in Washington.

To use a metaphor, the global policeman has withdrawn to headquarters, from where he is now aiming sanctions and tariffs at his opponents and rivals in the world.

And this has a dual impact on us in Europe.

Firstly, we ourselves become the target or collateral damage. Just think about the tariffs on European products or the effect of US sanctions on the JCPOA.

Secondly, US withdrawal frequently applies to places of particular relevance to European security and interests, not only of geographical relevance, in Syria or Afghanistan, for example, but also as regards institutions of the multilateral world order or treaties such as the Paris Climate Agreement.

Other stakeholders are making use of the vacuum created by this withdrawal:

Politically and economically, China is the main player.

And Russia is all too often involved at the military level. But so, too, are other players, as we are currently seeing in Syria.

What about us Europeans?

We certainly can’t just sit back and hope the old times will return. Those days are over.

And just as the shift in US foreign and security policy began before President Trump, it will also continue in the future. And I firmly believe that will be the case regardless of who wins the US election next year.

That's why we need to ask ourselves what our next move should be.

As ever, Europe is the starting point for everything we do.

We Social Democrats had our reasons for insisting that the title of the coalition agreement start with the phrase "a new awakening for Europe". One reason was that we had this development in mind.

We want a strong, sovereign and united Europe! A Europe that is able to assert its values and interests in the world.

And the time to create this Europe is not tomorrow or the day after that. The time is now because time is running out!

Despite all the predictions and alarmism, pro-

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parties achieved a broad majority in the European elections.

With regard to Brexit, no matter how regrettable it is, a solution – a productive one – finally seems to be on the Cards.

The new European Commission will finally start working in a few days' time.

And next year it will be up to us to set the course for the future when we hold the

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Presidency and chair the Committee of Ministers in the Council of Europe.

The disputes on the euro, the bank rescues, how to deal with the refugee situation, and the rule of law have created deep chasms in Europe in recent years. As a result, the main task during the last few months has been to rebuild trust in Europe, as the forces that seek to drive us apart do not only come from the outside, but primarily from the inside, from within the

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That's why we have intensified our relations with the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly with Poland.

By the way, I see it as a profoundly Social Democratic mission to conduct

Ostpolitik

and to build bridges between East and West in Europe. And many of our Central and Eastern European neighbours clearly also expect Germany to build these bridges. This doesn't mean disrupting paths, but rather maintaining the bridges we already have and, where necessary, building new bridges between East and West in Europe.

Our Eastern neighbours also expect to be treated as equals.

I think one of the most important strategic issues we need to discuss in Europe is the way forward. Various options are on the table. Will there be a first and second-class Europe in the future? Will there be a two-speed Europe, a Europe of more than two speeds, or will we remain one Europe?

Many people in Central and Eastern Europe worry that they will merely belong to a second-class Europe in the future. Their concern is that the countries that are willing and able will forge ever-closer ties, step up their integration and form a core Europe, which will then move ahead, with other countries possibly being allowed or obliged to join this group. I don't see this as the right way forward. When it comes to the major issue of Europe's strategic sovereignty and Europe being willing and able to assert its interests and values, this can only be achieved by a single Europe. And I firmly believe that any other path will not only harm the

EU's

ability to act internally, but will also prove detrimental to its ability to assert our values and interests externally.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For this reason, it is important to work exceptionally closely with our Eastern and Central European partners, despite all the difficulties. And when people keep asking, "well, what about the problems with the rule of law in Hungary, Poland and Romania?", yes, these problems exist and there is a clear and resolute process on them in the

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. With regard to the multiannual financial framework, we are currently discussing whether the payment of

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funding should be dependent on meeting rule-of-law criteria in the future. And there is no other option but to discuss these issues. However, I think we can very quickly forget about

still being able to influence countries we believe need to improve their rule-of-law structures if we have a first, second or third-class Europe. This will deepen

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division on rule-of-law issues and our fundamental values. And that can’t be in our interest.

But we have not only committed to and built greater trust with our Central and Eastern European neighbours in the last year and a half.

We have also liaised closely with countries such as Portugal and Slovenia, with which we form a trio, as they hold the

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Presidency before and after us. We know that if we want to change things in Europe, we have to keep issues on the agenda over the long term.

My French counterpart

Jean-Yves Le Drian

and I recently agreed on concrete steps to strengthen Europe. For example, we are currently exploring the idea of a European Security Council, which we both see as necessary, by coordinating our foreign and security policy work to a greater extent than in the past. We will make a proposal on this topic, too.

We and France are in agreement that Europe must act more cohesively, strategically and autonomously in foreign policy.

The logical conclusion here, in my opinion, is that majority voting in the Council should no longer be a taboo subject, particularly when it comes to foreign policy.

In the coming months, we want to make progress on implementing a genuine European policy on countries such as China and Russia – countries we need as partners, but which are also our competitors or rivals in terms of the European model. In September 2020, during our

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Presidency, we will hold an

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-China summit, with the aim of getting a coherent European policy on China off the ground.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One benchmark of our success in Europe must be whether we manage to de-escalate crises in our neighbourhood – crises that affect us as regards politics, security policy, the economy and migration.

During our

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Presidency, we want to set up a centre of excellence for civilian crisis management here in Berlin. The idea is that it will serve the entire

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and that other Member States will be involved in it. We just included this plan in the budget during the budget discussions currently taking place in the German Bundestag. We believe that we can't just put our heads together on a crisis once the shooting has started. We need to get together at an earlier stage to prevent crises. And we also believe that we can strengthen Europe's role as a force for peace in this way.

We also want to make progress on setting up a joint headquarters for all deployments under

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Common Security and Defence Policy. That is long overdue.

And speaking about our neighbourhood, the Western Balkans need credible prospects of

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membership.

This is not only a matter of the

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having to keep its word to countries such as North Macedonia and Albania.

It is also in our own strategic interest that the region remain stable and secure. And in the long term, that can only be achieved in the European Union!

Ladies and gentlemen,

We will also have to toughen Europe up as regards those with whom we compete on many levels. And sometimes partners become competitors. This includes learning that we also need to protect ourselves against extraterritorial sanctions. With regard to the JCPOA,

INSTEX, the Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges, which was set up with that in mind with France and the UK, is an example and also a start.

I am also thinking of Europe's digital sovereignty – another big topic of discussion at the moment. In the digital age, digital sovereignty can no longer be separated in any way from foreign and security policy sovereignty. And if we look at how the world is developing and how the digital revolution will affect us and change our societies, economies and even our private lives, I think this should be a priority for the

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as a whole, not just for the new Commission. If you want digital sovereignty today, you need something like platform sovereignty.

In the digital world – and this is becoming increasingly clear – two poles or centres are emerging. Silicon Valley is one of them. It follows a very clearly structured model, namely a profit-maximising one. China will form the other centre of the digital world. And with regard to digital technology, it is a repressive model.

Ladies and gentlemen, if these are the two models available to us, a purely profit-maximising one and a repressive one, I think it would be wise of Europe to consider a third way. And that's why everything involved here – technology, science and digital transformation – must also be one of the main issues and priorities in the multiannual financial framework and take significant precedence over other priorities from the past. Otherwise, we will find ourselves complaining at some point that we have made ourselves dependent in the digital world on two poles, neither of which is ideal in terms of our European values.

Our current discussion on 5G expansion shows where we stand. Basically, this is about whom we entrust the security of our data. And I would feel better if we could count on European solutions instead of being technologically dependent on others in this field, too. And, ladies and gentlemen, the

EU's

budget, which will be agreed next year, must reflect all this!

But digital sovereignty means more than this. We want to do more to protect the public and our democracies from disinformation and online hate crime. This must also be a priority of our

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Presidency, as ultimately it involves not only how information is shared, but also how opinions are formed. And forming an opinion is a cornerstone of democracies. That's why it isn't

something that can be dealt with as an afterthought. It is actually crucial for the development of our democratic principles.

And finally, it is also a fact that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its security – in its own fundamental interests. For that reason, we are going to work far more closely together on developing joint capabilities in Europe.

We want to strengthen Europe as a

NATO

partner in order to achieve a more balanced transatlantic partnership.

With regard to President

Macron’s

comments, I say frankly that thought experiments on separating US and European security worry me, not only when it comes to our own security, but most of all because I fear that they will cleave Europe in two.

However, we don’t need any new rifts. What we do need is far greater cohesion, as well as more cooperation between us.

And one way you achieve that is from more fairness and solidarity among the member states. This is another topic we will need to address.

That’s why we have decided to stop the race to the bottom on social standards, including in the

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We will do so through a joint framework for minimum wages and basic social security.

And we will also be much more resolute in tackling an issue that has been on the agenda for far too long, namely youth unemployment in Europe.

Not only is this the best recipe for cohesion, it is also the best response to the nationalists and populists who want to divide Europe and drive us apart, as they always flag up this issue. And we cannot allow that to happen.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Apart from strengthening Europe, the second big issue is preserving the rules-based international order, a topic that seems to be on everyone's lips these days. This order is currently under more pressure than at any other time in recent decades.

I attended the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Japan last week – an illustrious international gathering. We discussed multilateralism and the rules-based order. And everyone gave speeches on the importance of multilateralism and the rule of law. Listening to these speeches, it was impossible to understand why multilateralism and the rule of law are currently under such great pressure. This has something to do with the fact that there is now an ever-greater difference between talking and acting, including on the international stage. We don't have a problem with understanding. We have a problem with implementation. And that's why it will be necessary to tackle this issue.

That is also one of the reasons why I launched the Alliance for Multilateralism last year with three of my counterparts – the French, Canadian and Japanese Foreign Ministers. And in the meantime, after plenty of people asked us: "what is it?", "what's the point of it?" and "who else has joined?" around 60 countries from all over the world are now involved in it. This also shows me that nationalists may be experiencing an upswing in some places, but we multilateralists remain a strong counterweight and, most importantly, a great many international partners share our view that now in particular, we need more, not less, international cooperation.

And we are also using this weight to make progress on topics that are particularly dependent on international cooperation:

Implementing international humanitarian law and human rights

Safeguarding security and democracy in cyberspace

And dealing with the security-related impact of climate change. Climate change does not only have an ecological and economic dimension. For a long time now, it has also had a security dimension. It will be the basis and the cause of future wars.

Another key issue is how we deal with new weapons systems – with hypersonic missiles, threats from cyberspace and fully autonomous weapons systems. There have been a great many technological developments in recent years. But what has not developed in any way are international regulations on this technology.

To give you one example of where the Alliance for Multilateralism has already been successful, a few days ago, our group achieved an important step in Geneva on the path towards banning killer robots. We were able to persuade 125 countries to agree to central principles such as human responsibility and accountability in the use of such weapons. We

started this discussion a few months ago, but back then, we couldn’t even agree on certain terminology.

Nevertheless, we still have a long way to go. However, this outcome would not have been possible if we had not pledged our commitment to multilateralism in the Alliance and spoken with one voice to the other countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We Social Democrats know that arms races don’t make the world any safer. But to be realistic, we need to start from scratch to make other people around the world aware of this.

That’s why we put the topic of nuclear disarmament back on the Security Council agenda again – for the first time in seven years. For an entire seven years, no one mentioned this issue in the Security Council. And we are continuing to pursue it, for example with our partners in the Stockholm Initiative, who will meet here in Berlin early next year.

The fact that we are raising such cross-cutting issues in the Security Council is already paying dividends. Naturally, this does not resolve all the blockades we currently have in New York – and there are many of them. However, we have come closer to achieving one goal, namely that the Security Council finally focus on crisis prevention rather than merely on crisis response!

And something else has come about as a result of our Security Council membership: Germany is in demand; we are called on to take action and there are expectations of us as regards solving international crises and conflicts.

As a member of the Small Group on Syria, we support the political process that has now finally entered a new phase following the formation of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in Geneva a few days ago. Just over a year ago, we weren’t even a member of this group.

In Libya, the Berlin Process is now the “game in town” because on the one hand, we strengthen the

UN

Special Representative’s role in intra-Libyan talks, while on the other, we include the international players that have made the country the theatre of its proxy wars. We also want to hold a Heads of State and Government summit for Libya early next year and are already working on this event. You can imagine that this isn’t easy, given the situation we currently have in Libya. And there is no guarantee that there will be an outcome. But I think we are closer to a result than was the case at all the other Libya conferences that have taken place in recent years.

In the Ukraine conflict, we are headed towards the first Normandy format summit in over three years. The fact that we stuck to this negotiating channel is now paying off, as is the fact that we worked towards minor progress and confidence-building measures, be it on disengaging combat units, opening bridges or exchanging prisoners.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I see all of this as a reflection of a profoundly Social Democratic foreign policy, a policy based on diplomacy, mediation, fostering better relations and alleviating tensions; a policy that does not shirk international responsibility.

International solidarity and endeavours to foster peace and human rights have been at the heart of social democracy for over 150 years. And that must stay this way even if international circumstances have changed!

At the start of my speech, I talked about memory bias and the risks it poses. But if there is an antidote to this, then it is talking to one another and bringing together different points of view at events like this.

And that, Kurt, is why this conference is an important element. When we say that we now need more, and not less, international cooperation, this does not only apply to

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or

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organs, but also to political parties, foundations and civil society.

That is why I would like to thank the

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

and you personally, Kurt, for creating a forum through the Tiergarten Conference where we can discuss what needs to change and how the sea change we are currently experiencing will affect us.

I have tried to present some of the views that are constantly on our minds, as well as possible solutions.

It is important to me – also with a view to the current discussion and how the public perceives it – to state that German foreign policy and social democratic foreign policy can and may never be disruptive. Instead, it must offer an alternative to the disruptive reality. At the moment, there is a lot of talk about who makes new proposals and who paves the way. My

impression is that almost none of the many proposals currently floating around public discourse lead to any kind of operational results. And that is why we must finally recognise that this isn’t merely an ideas competition. An ideas competition is nice. It’s a good basis. But because of the developments I described today, it cannot be a matter of whose foreign policy is the most disruptive. Instead, what counts is who sets the tone and, most importantly, who is able to keep things together – the

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and the large number of international treaties. I believe that this must always be at the heart of social democratic foreign policy, and that is why we will need to work even harder now than was perhaps the case in the past.

Thank you very much.

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