“Strengthening Europe is the right response”

2017-02-16

Foreign Minister Gabriel in an interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper (16 February 2017)

Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel talks to the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper (interview published on 16 February 2017).

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Minister Gabriel, which of these do you believe will be Germany’s greatest foreign policy challenge: Trump, Putin, Le Pen, China or the so-called Islamic State?

I believe it will be Europe. All of the names you mentioned demonstrate, after all, that in the world of today and certainly in the future, we can only have a say in, and help to shape, global affairs if we stay united as a continent. Currently, we are not strong enough. The historic challenge we face is that of building a new and stronger Europe. Otherwise, we will not be taken seriously by Mr Trump, Mr Putin, or China. The propaganda of Ms Le Pen, too, feeds on the weakness of Europe.

Should our goal continue to be the creation of an “ever closer Europe”, a Europe that is increasingly integrated?

Certainly not in the sense that we would integrate all policy areas, so that everything is decided in Brussels. The Brexit vote in the UK has clearly demonstrated to us that this is not desirable. In other countries, too, many have reason to dislike European micromanagement.

It is not so much about “more Europe” as it is about a different, stronger and better Europe. In fact, Europe has been evolving at variable speeds for quite some time already. Just think of the eurozone, or of the common external border of the Schengen area. Not all

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Member States participate. In both spheres, we urgently need more cooperation and mutual responsibility. Especially in the monetary union. But there are also opportunities for closer cooperation in other areas, where a group can first lead the way, in particular with regard to issues for which nation states certainly no longer have the best solutions. Europe is needed everywhere where national sovereignty has long ago become an illusion, due to dramatic

changes in the world. It is Europe that needs to get us this sovereignty back, thanks to concerted action.

Where can that still be done and how?

First, there is our common foreign and security policy. For too long, we believed that the United States would be best at defending our way of life, and we absconded our responsibility for all dubious action in the world. We then proceeded to criticise the US for its global role. By doing so, many took a very comfortable stance. Those times, we must admit, have passed. We ourselves must determine how we will defend our interests and values, and what our tasks will be in this restless, crisis-ridden world in which there are many things we're not happy about. Let me give just one example. We simply can no longer allow European Member States to vote differently in the United Nations Security Council.

Second, I want to say something about securing Europe's external border. Particularly in Germany, this idea was for a long time rejected, the argument being that border management is a national responsibility. But we actually need, and most urgently need, European border management, as a combination of national and

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efforts. In this connection, there is also the need for a common policy on refugees and migration.

Third, we must do more and cooperate even better at European level on internal security. Not only against terrorists, but also against organised crime.

Fourth, there is the need to strengthen our competitiveness and to stimulate growth through investment in education and research, as well as in public infrastructure. This most certainly includes a common financial and economic policy in the eurozone.

And, fifth, we have a single market that must be transformed into a social market economy. One aspect here is that we must fight against fiscal and social dumping. Jacques Delors once said that "nobody can fall in love with the single market". Today, we see how right he was. When workers have to compete on the basis of unfair conditions, we need not wonder that they turn away from Europe.

Is there still enough common political ground in Europe to accomplish all of this? These days, there are many reasons to strongly doubt this.

Outside pressure can actually have a healing effect: offensive action by Russia, crises, conflicts and instability to the south and south-east of Europe, along with the fact that we can no longer be certain about the United States' policy on the transatlantic partnership. All this has heightened our awareness of the fact that we must now take our destiny into our own

hands. Making Europe better and stronger is in our own interest. We are not going to do this because of United States pressure, but rather because it is what we want and what we ourselves need. Otherwise, we as Europeans risk no longer being perceived in the world of tomorrow.

What signs do you see of a new desire for concerted action?

Warsaw's call for Europe to acquire its own nuclear forces is extremely unrealistic. But please go ahead and delete the word "nuclear"! The fact that Poland is seriously considering the need to strengthen Europe's defence capabilities shows how fundamentally the situation has changed. And yes, that does give me hope. For until only recently Poland and other Eastern European partners were actually only interested in their safety being guaranteed by the United States. Now, we are hearing from Warsaw that we need a common European Defence Policy. Prague and Bucharest are placing some national brigades under Bundeswehr command. I served in the military at a time when something like that was unthinkable. I find this very moving.

After the election of Donald Trump, some began speaking of the end of the West. Do you share that fear?

The term "West" is not a geographic category, but rather a universal concept of freedom and democracy. The Egyptian demonstrators who took to Tahrir Square were more closely aligned with the idea of the West than the United States, when looking at its detention camp in Guantanamo. These days, we can unfortunately no longer be so certain that all social and political forces in the US still feel committed to this concept.

For us, this means that we must remain all the more steadfast in upholding Western values. "Hoping for the best and preparing for the worst" is the right motto. The good news is that everything we do to prepare for the worst will also help us in a best case scenario. Because a stronger Europe will be able to forge a new partnership with the United States if the US remains committed to Western values but neither can nor wants to remain the leading power. It would be a partnership on an equal footing and with shared responsibility, instead of just following the US's lead.

What would the West look like without US leadership?

We in Europe would face real difficulties if the US were to even temporarily turn its back on us. But this doesn't mean that we should also drop our commitment to Western values. Should the US turn its back, then this would force Europe to do what we should have done long ago. Any way you look at it, strengthening Europe is the right response.

So it took Donald Trump becoming president to come to this conclusion?

That’s simply human nature. When things are going well, people tend to resist change. The truth is, however, that Barack Obama already pivoted away from the traditional transatlantic partnership. He was the first US president to speak of the United States being a Pacific, no longer a transatlantic, nation. We are witnessing the end of the post-war order, where we were in a comfortable position. In this order, the United States was responsible for providing leadership and security. Now, these responsibilities will increasingly be held by us Europeans ourselves.

What lessons should German and European politicians draw from Trump’s electoral victory?

Firstly, political discourse here must be different from what we saw in the US. Yes, there can be heated debate on the issues. But it needs to be conducted without abandoning all respect for political opponents. We must never permit unrestrained contempt, mud-slinging and malice to take hold over here.

Secondly, if you lose touch with workers in the rust belt, the votes of all the hipsters in California will not save you. The desire to be on the cutting edge of a cultural movement must not cause you to lose sight of the interests of everyday citizens. There is a danger of that happening in Germany, as well. Just look at the widening cultural gap between urban and rural populations.

Are those ideal conditions for populism?

Trump’s election was the outcome of political developments in the United States. It did not cause those developments. General disregard for people’s concerns can make many feel they no longer have a voice in society, particularly in the discourse of the liberal elite. When these people want to make themselves heard, they do so at elections, with the power of the ballot. They then send the clear message: “We’re still here!” . Doing so does not make you a right or left wing extremist. We must not lose touch with these people, or be fully satisfied with liberal elitist dialogues. We need to make sure all sections of society feel the democratic political system is looking out for them. And that civic engagement can make life better for everyone.

Are you afraid that trade policy may become the most contentious issue between the US and Europe?

Currently, we do not know if the new US administration will be guided by interests or by ideology. If it focuses on interests, then we will be able to talk about the issues. Penalty tariffs would put pressure on important parts of United States value chains. That would be just as bad for the US consumer as for US industry. If, however, the focus is on ideology, things will be tough. Then, it’ll not be about balancing interests, but about a friend-or-foe mentality. If the United States wished to define itself consistently as nationalistic and ethnically homogeneous, then Europe would appear to be an opponent. Because Europe was

established for precisely the opposite reasons – to counteract national dominance and promote cultural and ethnic diversity.

What did you take away from your visit to Washington?

We held good talks with Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Tillerson and in the Senate. I was encouraged by those meetings. We must not underestimate that the separation of powers has put down deep roots in the system established by the US Constitution. There are not only the courts, but there is also a self-confident Congress. We must not pretend that democracy in the United States has been permanently swept aside.

Martin Schultz, who is running for Chancellor for the SPD, has accused Trump of taking a wrecking ball to our fundamental values. Your predecessor Minister Steinmeier, our future Federal President, has called Trump a “preacher of hate”. Can the SPD resist the temptation of tapping into anti-US sentiment in Germany to get ahead in the electoral campaign? This would make things more difficult for you as Foreign Minister.

If criticising the US presidential campaign and a number of statements made by Trump supporters amounted to anti-US sentiment, then half of the citizens of the United States would be anti-US. They are, after all, voicing even stronger criticism of developments in their country than we are.

What dangers does Trump’s win pose to Europe?

Nothing lasts forever, as Willy Brandt once said. This unfortunately also applies to democracy. Again and again, democracy has to be defended. And the main threats we face are not coming from the US. In France, there are legitimate fears that Marine Le Pen may make it to the second round of voting in the French presidential election. The Front National has declared that its objective is to destroy Europe. This has become a clear and present danger. Unfortunately.

What do you plan to do about it?

In Europe, we must again start to really listen to one another, and we must practice greater solidarity. If France acts to defend Europe’s security interests by spending money on the operation in Mali and, in return, asks that these expenses be credited towards its efforts to meet the Maastricht criteria, then it should not be automatically condemned for doing so. Especially not by Germany. Anyone who rejects such European burden-sharing should not be surprised if his country’s calls for fair distribution of refugees go unanswered.

Many view Germany as overly didactic and unwilling to yield any ground on minor issues, while demanding solidarity when it comes to its own interests. Of course there are good

reasons for compliance with stability criteria. I do think, however, that we have gotten to a point where we must show much more willingness to compromise.

Would election of Le Pen mark the end of the

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History does not end. Also in the hopefully unlikely event of a President Le Pen, the idea of European integration would not disappear. It might even be reinvigorated. But without France's commitment, the European Union would certainly not be feasible in the long term. And the French would be the very first to feel the effects. Because tremendous uncertainty over the future of Europe would of course lead to the flight of capital, a lack of investment and mass unemployment. The weaker sections of society would be affected first.

But the

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can carry on without Britain?

I deeply regret the Brexit – and I have two bits of advice: First, we should do everything from a foreign and security policy standpoint to maintain the closest possible ties between Britain and Europe. Second, with regard to the internal market, I could imagine establishing a privileged partnership. But there is one line we must not cross – no

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country must thereby be tempted to leave the Union.

I would like to return to the stability criteria and to the view that Germany is overly didactic. You equate Wolfgang Schäuble's policy on Greece with willingly accepting a Grexit. Will Athens again become a central issue in the Bundestag election campaign?

I believe that the CDU, and especially the Federal Chancellor, understand perfectly well that revisiting the debate over Greece leaving the eurozone is the last thing we need right now. Amputations are truly last-resort medical procedures. I believe the conservatives in Germany cannot be interested in conjuring up the dangers inherent in this issue. Already now, bets against the Euro are up again, and the spreads are increasing. This certainly cannot be in our interests.

Do you think that, by arguing for debt relief, Martin Schultz is representing Germany's interests?

First, it is the International Monetary Fund that is currently putting forward the idea of debt relief. It doubts that Brussels' current plans for repayment of Athens' debt are realistic. Demanding that Athens generate an annual budget surplus of 3.5 percent over a period of ten years is voodoo economics.

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has played an even smaller role than the US in efforts to end the conflict in Syria. And yet, with the refugee crisis, we have directly felt the effects of this bloodbath, which has gone on for years. Like in eastern Ukraine, Putin has now entrenched himself in Syria. Will Germany have to take more than symbolic action to address such conflicts?

Years ago, Turkey called for no-fly zones in Syria. I was one of only a few members of the SPD that said we should at least give this some thought. Many believed that even considering this would be too much involvement. We will have to learn that there are many things we may not like, but that exist nevertheless. If we do not want important issues to be decided on, and action taken, without us being consulted – as Russia did with respect to Syria – then we will just have to be more willing to get involved than we thought we could in the past. I am not arguing for replacing interventionist US policy with European interventionism. On the contrary, I do not at all believe that military intervention should always be the go-to solution. That said, there can be exceptional situations in which it would be right to do more. Like, for example, arming the Kurdish Peshmerga so they can defend themselves against attacks by ISIS. That's something we have to have a public discussion about in Germany.

Do you have a plan for Syria?

We Europeans should do everything in our power to ensure that, based on the talks in Astana, all sides return to the Geneva Process under the auspices of the United Nations. That's why we scheduled a meeting of like-minded countries on the margins of tomorrow's G20 meeting in Bonn.

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Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has announced that he has issued invitations to peace talks in Geneva next week. The opposition appears better prepared than it did only a few months ago. That is a ray of hope, because without political agreement between the regime and the opposition there can be no peace. When agreements are reached separately and don't involve all relevant players, some parties to the conflict may try to undermine them.

In your view, what is Russia: a partner, a rival or an opponent?

First and foremost, Russia is our neighbour, whether you like it or not. That alone is reason for us to take a strong interest in establishing a partnership with Russia. But such a partnership must of course not be naive. After all, a stronger Europe is significant not only in terms of our relationship with the US, but especially because of Russia. Russia only takes us seriously if we are united, confident and strong.

What specifically does that mean for sanctions?

First of all, with the Normandy process, Europe has assumed responsibility on an issue of global significance. The United States had almost reached the point of providing weapons to Ukraine. It was through a strong, self-determined effort that Europe, represented by Germany and France, managed to prevent this from happening with the Minsk agreement. For the very first time, we Europeans had taken the lead to contain the threat of conflict.

That is why it is also very frustrating that Kyiv and Moscow have for months not managed to find a way to implement what was agreed in Minsk. So what does that mean? On the one hand, Europe will have to keep its promise and provide long-term support to help Ukraine get back on its feet. On the other hand, Europe will have to make clear to Moscow that a partnership will only work if Russia fully abstains from attempts to cause division in Europe with a conflict in the East. Only once the Minsk agreement has been implemented can the sanctions gradually be lifted.

The head of the SPD parliamentary group Oppermann has argued for establishing camps in Africa to house refugees. Tunesia rejects this idea, and Libya is a failed state. What should the

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do if more refugees set out again to cross the Mediterranean?

Thomas Oppermann has presented an entire plan, and it cannot be reduced to a single aspect. It is not through isolated measures that we will successfully address flows of migrants and refugees. Rather, we must take a coordinated and wide range of actions.

One of these is to support and, where necessary, stabilise the countries of origin and transit. Another effort, and by far not the final one, must be to agree on a common European asylum policy. Before we can take any measures in Libya, the country must have a government that is capable of action, one that can actually protect the rights of refugees and migrants. The arrangement reached with Turkey, which by the way has the seal of approval of the

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High Commissioner for Refugees, can currently not be transposed to Tunisia or Libya. Tunisia would be destabilised, and in Libya the current conditions are simply unacceptable.

[...]

Interview conducted by Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, Berthold Kohler and Majid Sattar.

Overview "Newsroom"

Source : https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/170216-bm-faz-287898