Speech by Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the Ministerial Debate on Current Crises at the Munich Security Conference

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Philip, Sergey,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Munich has many places and traditions that it is known for around the world. One place in particular accounts for Munich’s renown in the political arena and has done for more than fifty years: the Munich Security Conference. It was joined by another place in 2015, though: Munich Central Station.

With more than a million refugees having made their way to Germany in the last year, many of them through Munich, the crises facing the world have literally arrived on our doorstep – in our towns, our gymnasiums, our classrooms.

When we spoke for the first time here at the Munich Security Conference two years ago about Germany’s increased international responsibility, there were sections of German public opinion that called the debate abstract, divorced from reality, even presumptuous. That was wrong even then. And no one is saying this any more. In light of the refugee crisis, the question of international responsibility does not sound like an abstract idea to us Germans, but rather a very real and pressing issue.

My plea is that Germany must not take the refugee crisis as an excuse to shut out the world. On the contrary, the refugee crisis should spur us on to be even more determinedly involved in international affairs.

It goes without saying that the massive refugee movement needs a response at many different levels – local, national and European measures, and of course the admirable work of countless volunteers on the ground. But even if we do manage to achieve all our aims on the national and European level as regards reducing the number of refugees, the simple fact remains that people do not leave their homes for no good reason. They flee war, violence and

terrorism. This is why foreign policy matters. We need to tackle the roots of the problem. We need to help defuse and resolve the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. Without de-escalation, we in Europe will only be working on the symptoms of the problem, not on the causes.

My first point, then, is that we need to be more involved rather than shutting ourselves off. This goes for the German side, too – and I think we are demonstrating that.

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The second point is that political conflict-resolution processes are at the heart of our involvement in the trouble spots. The most important of those at the moment is the Syria process that began in Vienna.

After five years of civil war, 300,000 deaths and the destruction of eleven million people's homes, we have finally got those parties to the negotiating table that need to be there to make a settlement possible: the United States, Russia, Europe and the regional players, principally Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran. And we brought them all together again here in Munich the day before yesterday. There were nine hours of difficult talks – a "free and frank exchange of views", as diplomats would say. But the outcome allows me to hope that we have at least found a way here in Munich to start tangibly reducing the violence, particularly in Aleppo. This should lead to a ceasefire and enable urgently needed humanitarian access to the people who are suffering so terribly in Syria. We will only know whether or not a breakthrough has been achieved when the first aid convoys make their way to the people in Deir ez-Zor and the rural areas around Damascus at the weekend.

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That brings me to my third point: strong countries have responsibilities beyond their own borders.

This goes for all the countries around the table on Thursday.

Yes, there is much talk about the role of Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This is also a topic here in Munich. There is much talk about national interests and ambitions, about regional shows of strength, and about national fears and face-saving. All that is real and relevant, but I believe that a country's true strength has to be measured by its willingness and ability to assume responsibility not only for its own security, but also beyond its own borders in the region. And because there are such enormous national differences, responsibility must be put into practice at the negotiating table, where we committed to shared responsibility in Syria on Thursday. The Munich commitments are clear – we must now measure each other by their implementation!

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That is not to say that all you need for foreign policy is a round table. On the contrary, the fourth point I wish to make is that political processes only have a chance if we actively support them. Germany has been making full use of the toolbox of active foreign policy over the last two years:

· This includes humanitarian assistance, where we are the third-largest donor in the world. We recently increased this support by a further 2.3 billion euros in London to help those affected by the disaster in Syria, particularly Lebanon and Jordan.

· We also contribute to the

UN

system and the

EU's

Common Foreign and Security Policy. Take Mali, where we are not only involved in the

EU

police training mission, but also providing up to 650 Bundeswehr soldiers to the

UN

peace mission. Take Afghanistan, where we have just increased the Bundeswehr's role one again on the arduous path to enabling Afghanistan to take on responsibility for its own security. Take the process of modernising the Bundeswehr that my colleague Ursula von der Leyen reported on here yesterday.

· Germany is also involved in the military fight against the so-called Islamic State, not only in the air strikes over Syria but also – as we have been for a year and a half – in providing equipment and training to the Peshmerga in northern Iraq, including weapons. That involvement is bearing fruit. But let us not delude ourselves that a military victory over IS will be enough to bring about peace in Syria.

· This is precisely why Germany is working systematically and more intensively on stabilising fragile states. Take Libya for example. John Kerry and I have invited representatives of the Libyan state here to Munich this afternoon because reaching political agreement on a functional government on the basis of the

UN

plan is now of the utmost urgency. Further tactical manoeuvring only serves to help IS!

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Those of us with responsibility for foreign policy are asked questions by the public, such as “Aren’t you doing anything? Why don’t you have fast solutions? Have you lost sight of your goals in foreign and security policy? Do you simply shrug your shoulders and accept the brutal reality?”

My fifth and final point is thus the following: we also need to recognise unwelcome realities. But what counts is that we do not accept them. Intelligent policies do not lose sight of the overall goal – but nor do they mean we idly stand by if this goal cannot be achieved in the short term. No one put it better than the trade unionist Karl Richter who said, as Willy Brandt was so fond of quoting, “You have to take the world as you find it – but you mustn’t leave it that way.”

This intelligent Realpolitik will be more and more important. I advise a realistic look at the world – we have certainly not gone back to the Cold War. Instead, we are increasingly faced with new conflict structures, with eroding orders, with conflicts less between states and more often between state and non-state actors, in which the core conflicts are overlaid in complex ways with the national interests of neighbouring countries, which are also struggling for hegemony, as can be seen in the Middle East, but not only there.

Those of us with responsibility for foreign policy increasingly find ourselves in situations where seeing things in black-and-white terms does not help; where fault and responsibility for the roots of a conflict cannot be determined with any real certainty – and where solutions are urgently needed nevertheless. Whether we are talking about Syria, Libya or Ukraine – none of these processes are perfect. All of them are protracted, full of contradictions, no stranger to setbacks.

This may come as a disappointment to those who want fast and perfect solutions. But the world isn’t like that. We will have to get to grips with its contradictions. We need to bridge rifts, to bring conflicting interests together, to unite what seems irreconcilable. And this is something that German foreign policy does not merely talk about today – it is what it does. We endeavour to ensure that we do not leave the world as we find it.

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