Speech by Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier at the 50th Munich Security Conference

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-- Translation of advance text --

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past four years I've been a regular guest of the Munich Security Conference. Even so, I'm delighted this time to be addressing you once again as my country's foreign minister. So thank you very much, Wolfgang, for inviting me and may I congratulate the MSC very warmly on turning fifty.

When Ewald von Kleist founded this forum under a different name all those years ago, no one could have anticipated how much it would influence the foreign and security policy debate well beyond our own borders. One reason was because in the MSC's early years the Federal Republic of Germany was located right on the periphery of the Western world, at the interface between two hostile blocs; it had nothing that could be turned into foreign and security policy clout. Thanks to the wise guidance and hard work of Horst Teltschik and – over the past six years – Wolfgang Ischinger, this annual conference has been steadily modernised and expanded. Thematically it deals with issues right at the top of the international agenda. Today the MSC is clearly more than a family get together for the foreign and security policy community – it's that, too, of course, but it's a great deal more besides. That explains its undiminished attraction. Every year experts gather here in Munich from all over the world to discuss crises and conflicts along with possible ways to resolve them. They come also to discuss new threats and above all to explore differences in perception.

Just how important especially this last point is Christopher Clark has highlighted this year, when we commemorate the outbreak of World War I, in his book "The Sleepwalkers". What he writes makes sombre reading. He has meticulously documented how in 1914, over the course of just a few weeks, lack of communication, estrangement, personal ambition and jingoistic nationalism drove first Europe and then the whole world into the great seminal catastrophe of the 20th century. Within weeks the situation was out of control, all communication was broken off and death went knocking from door to door. Over these past 50 years the MSC has played its part – as it will need to do also in future, I believe – in preventing things getting to such a pass; in preventing peaceful interaction turning once again

into unfettered hatred; and in ensuring that even when opinions differ, the channels of communication remain open.

When I returned to the Federal Foreign Office four weeks ago, the first thought that crossed my mind was yes, my office is the same, my desk's the same I left four years ago. But is the world still the same? After a while observing world events more as a bystander, you notice more clearly perhaps what's changed. Violent conflicts have moved closer to Europe's borders; here in our own continent they're back, indeed, as we see in Ukraine.

In East Asia we're a long way from truly understanding the background, the multiple layers of history behind the escalating rhetoric between China, Japan and their neighbours.

And on returning from Geneva I ask myself whether we've really been discussing only the bloody conflict in Syria or in fact the imminent erosion of all state authority across the whole Middle East, similar to what's happening in the arc of crisis extending from the Sahel right down to the Gulf of Guinea.

Reason enough, surely, to talk about what diplomacy's possibilities and limits are, and of course also Germany's role in this connection. As I've recently made a number of public comments on this and can expand on them later on the podium, let me briefly state just seven propositions:

Germany must be ready for earlier, more decisive and more substantive engagement in the foreign and security policy sphere.

Assuming responsibility in this sphere must always mean something concrete. It must amount to more than rhetorical outrage or the mere issue of grades for the efforts and activities of others. A concrete example of the German Government's changed stance here is our offer to destroy residual waste from Syria's chemical weapons in German facilities, which are among the most modern in the world.

Germany is keen to supply and will supply conceptual input for a common European foreign, security and defence policy. Europe's foreign policy can be more than the sum of many small parts only if our combined weight – including Europe's South and East – is brought to bear. In this spirit we're currently considering what practical assistance, also of a military nature, we can provide to help stabilise fragile states in Africa, Mali in particular.

The use of military force is an instrument of last resort. It should rightly be used with restraint. Yet a culture of restraint for Germany must not become a culture of standing aloof. Germany is too big merely to comment on world affairs from the sidelines. What we must do first and foremost, in fact, is sit down together with others and think harder and more creatively about how our diplomatic toolbox could be improved and utilised for productive initiatives.

Here in Munich we should put our combined weight behind the effort to facilitate a peaceful solution to the crisis in Ukraine. The current stand off must not be resolved by the use of force. When the fuse to the powder keg has already been lit, it’s highly dangerous to play for time. President Yanukovych must deliver fully on the pledges he’s made to the Opposition. Then there’s a realistic chance the political stand off can be resolved in the next few days.

Despite our many differences, we need to explore with Russia how we could put our relationship onto a more constructive and cooperative footing. Only with Russia will a deal with Iran be achieved. Only with Russia will the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons be achieved. We would be making a mistake to conceive of Europe’s future without Moscow, or even in opposition to it. But let me make another point just as firmly and clearly. It’s also up to Moscow to define common interests.

Over these past decades Europe and the United States have been extremely close. For us the North Atlantic Alliance has been an indispensable anchor in a troubled world. Both economically and politically, Europe and America are each other’s closest partners. But obviously our partnership can’t thrive on continuity alone.

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership or TTIP is a huge opportunity of strategic dimensions. But we also need to rethink and clarify our partnership in the digital world. Many Germans have lost faith in our partnership with the United States. This is something we can’t be indifferent to. And it’s not something that’s self healing. We see in President Obama’s recent speech that he’s genuinely concerned about his country’s security, yet also concerned about the West’s cohesion in the digital age. That’s something we must work on together. What’s needed here is an appropriate transatlantic forum where we can develop parameters which will ensure in this era of “big data” that basic civil rights are protected and make clear what rules apply in future to both governments and businesses. We would be tackling one of the really big issues that will shape the younger generation’s perceptions of America in years to come. In present company I don’t need to convince anyone of the importance of transatlantic friendship. But the same can’t be said of the younger generation. It’s our job and also our responsibility to convince them.

Syria, Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Afghanistan, tensions in East Asia – that’s by no means an exhaustive list of this year’s hot spots. Given the foreign and security policy challenges ahead, we certainly won’t be short of work.

Thank you very much.

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