Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the General Debate of the 74th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations

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Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the General Assembly of the United Nations

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Here in New York over the past few days, you have all heard a great many speeches – at the Climate Action Summit, at the SDG Summit, at countless side events, and of course here, at the speech-making marathon known as the General Debate.

If you were to analyse all these speeches, you would probably find that one word crops up more often than any other: sustainability.

Some people think that this word is nothing but hype. A marketing trend. A bit of greenwashing for the post-material elite.

And while we do nothing more than talk about sustainability, none of that will change.

Because while we are talking about sustainability here in New York, we risk losing the race against climate change. The earth is ablaze.

While we are talking about sustainability, women, men and children are suffering starvation and epidemics.

While we are talking about sustainability, people are dying as a result of wars and conflicts that we have been trying to resolve for years, without success. Syria, Mali, Ukraine, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea: the list is far too long.

It is time to do more than just talk about sustainability. It is time to act sustainably – including in foreign and security policy.

A sustainable foreign policy is one that seeks lasting solutions to conflicts. One that involves all stakeholders, in order to ensure both acceptance and stability.

One that focuses on prevention, instead of just reacting to events. One that relies on viable agreements, not speedy deals at the expense of others.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Anyone who loves their country will be committed to cooperation. Because only if we work together will we all have a future.

Sustainable foreign policy is multilateral foreign policy.

It is this very concept that underpins the United Nations. It is also the guiding principle for German and European foreign policy.

I would like to give you four examples that make this clear.

Firstly: the situation in the Middle East. The attacks on two oil facilities in Saudi Arabia have shown us how fast things can escalate. Iran bears the responsibility, as we Europeans have made clear – publicly and at our meetings in recent days with the Iranian Foreign Minister.

The only way towards an easing of tension is talks between the United States and Iran.

But that will only happen if no unrealistic preconditions are placed on such a dialogue.

There is something else we emphasised today at our meeting with Iran, Russia and China: we want to continue to adhere to the JCPoA and the goal of an Iran with no nuclear weapons.

Because it creates security and a basis for further-reaching talks about other issues of importance in this context. Even if it is difficult. When it comes down to it, diplomacy means not following and getting bogged down in black-and-white logic. It also means sticking to mutual agreements.

And that is why we expect Iran to meet the obligations it entered into vis-à-vis us and the entire international community.

And to respond to our ongoing European efforts to embark on a diplomatic solution.

Secondly: Afghanistan. We very much regret that the terrible attacks by the Taliban sabotaged the talks with the United States in Doha. Germany closely followed and supported these talks from the outset. Because we are convinced that a sustainable solution to the conflict can only come about through political compromise. Only in this way can we ensure that peace endures in the long term.

We owe this to all those who, over the past 18 years, have been engaged for a peaceful Afghanistan, in some cases even paying with their lives.

For this reason, an agreement with the Taliban can also only be a first step. What we then need are intra-Afghan peace talks.

Germany is ready to support these – not least in order to ensure that all that the United Nations and the entire international community have worked for over almost two decades is not lost: a constitutional order, a minimum of stability, human rights and in particular the rights of women and girls.

Thirdly: Ukraine. In the past two years, the Minsk process has more or less come to a standstill. In the middle of Europe we are seeing aggression that has cost over 13,000 lives. We will not simply sit back and accept this. We must not.

The people in Ukraine want peace. President Zelensky has made this very clear and has said it is a priority. And that has provided a new impetus.

Let's look, for example, at the bridge in Stanytsia Luhanska. For four years, it was destroyed; now it is being rebuilt. Military equipment and soldiers are being withdrawn. At first glance, this is a small step, an example of the disengagement called for by the Minsk process.

But it is a huge step for the people who use the bridge each and every day.

We want to seize this momentum. Together with France, we are working hard in the Normandy format to find solutions at last to the issues that have been on the table for almost four years. After all, pursuing a sustainable foreign policy also means doggedly pursuing a goal, step by step. Standing still is not an option!

And finally: Syria. In what is now the ninth year of war, the idea of sustainable peace seems almost naive. And yet there are grounds these days for cautious hope.

The creation of a constitutional committee is a first important step towards a political process. It is important that the committee begins work quickly and implements Resolution 2254 at last. Because only if we finally tackle the causes of conflict – namely the Syrian people's desire for social, economic and political participation – can there be lasting peace. And only when political progress is visible is reconstruction sustainable. Until then, we, Germany, will not take part.

Something else that is at least as important is justice. How can thousands of traumatised, tortured, displaced Syrians, how can victims of poison gas attacks, believe in peace, if their tormentors go unpunished? The predominant impression now, not only in Syria, is that even the severest crimes are not being punished. International criminal law is under massive pressure.

That is why, before the week is out, we will establish an Alliance against Impunity, designed to strengthen international criminal jurisdiction. Because without justice there can be no reconciliation and no peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These four examples show that sustainable foreign policy demands stamina, resilience, resolve. Above all, though, it means working together reliably.

And where we do cooperate, things are progressing – often beyond the glare of the spotlight.

In the Sudan, after 30 years, there is at long last hope of a truly new beginning. We were there recently. We spoke with those in positions of responsibility and assured them that we will continue to support the transformation – through mediation, in the Security Council, as a UNAMID troop contributor, and as a donor.

And it is not only in the Sudan that we are supporting peace processes. I am therefore pleased to announce that Germany is doubling its contribution to the Peacebuilding Fund this year, from 15 to 30 million euros.

In Mali, United Nations blue helmets, including almost 1000 Germans, are securing the fragile peace day by day. The prerequisite for lasting stability is that the people regain confidence in the local security forces.

That is why we, along with France, have established the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel. And we call upon all Member States to join.

A solution has yet to be found in the conflict in Libya, too. We support the United Nations and its tireless Special Representative, Ghassan Salamé. An international process involving supporters of the parties to the conflict is the only way forward. Here, too, we want to take on responsibility, and together with the Special Representative we have launched a process intended to lead to peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Germany has now been a member of the Security Council for nine months. And my impression is that, far too often, crises and conflicts are not discussed in that body until shots have been fired and people have died. Yet that is the very opposite of sustainable policymaking! Because then it is too late.

The Security Council must move from being a crisis response body to being a crisis prevention body! At long last, it must also look at the causes of conflicts.

That’s why we put “Climate and Security” on the agenda right at the start of our term. And we will ensure that it stays there.

Because climate change has long ceased to be merely an ecological challenge for humanity. More and more often, it is a matter of war and peace. Climate change is nothing other than a question of the survival of humanity.

If people no longer have access to clean drinking water, if entire harvests are ruined by persistent drought, and if conflicts erupt over the few remaining resources, the wars of the future will be climate wars.

Climate protection therefore needs to become an imperative in a sustainable foreign policy.

During our Security Council membership, we are also focusing on the role of women. Sexual violence is still being used as a tactic of war. This is abhorrent and perverse. With the adoption of Resolution 2467 in April we were able to help ensure better support for survivors of sexual violence.

But more is at stake here. A stable peace is a third more likely if women are involved in the process. So we are committed to seeing an increase in the number of women peacekeepers.

Currently only eight in every 100 seats at peace talks are occupied by women. That is more than negligent. It simply will not work if 51% of the world’s population is excluded!

So we will continue to do whatever we can to fight for an equal world. This is not only a matter of justice; it is a matter of human reason.

We will also continue to fight in the Security Council for disarmament and arms control. It was thanks to us that the subject of nuclear arms control was put back on the agenda in April, for the first time in seven years!

Even though one thing is utterly clear: we can build security only if we work with each other, not against each other.

That is why many states are calling strongly and increasingly impatiently for a return to concrete, realistic steps towards disarmament. Especially in the nuclear sphere. That’s why those states which have not yet ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty must finally do so!

With the Stockholm initiative, we want to anchor nuclear disarmament issues firmly on the international agenda prior to the NPT Review Conference. And I am looking forward to welcoming the supporters of this initiative to Berlin next year.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Cooperation. Compromise. Defence of our joint rules and institutions. That is what we understand by sustainability when it comes to foreign policy.

More than virtually any other country, Germany has benefited from the rules-based order over the past seventy years. Peace, prosperity, free trade, a world open to the outside, but also a liberal society within, are inextricably linked with multilateralism. Never again going it alone – that is a lesson from our, from German, history.

Precisely because it was Germany that 80 years ago unleashed fire and destruction in Europe and the world, today we must assume a special responsibility for an order which secures peace.

That is why we launched an Alliance for Multilateralism last year. Because we do not agree with the logic that claims that “if everyone thinks of themselves, then everyone has been thought of”. Because ultimately that logic means nothing other than that everyone is pitted against everyone else.

However, not one of the major issues of the future confronting us today can be resolved by one country acting alone. Only if we work together will we find answers to globalisation, the digital revolution, migration or human-induced climate change!

Cooperation is anything but a betrayal of one’s own country. Rather, it creates the preconditions for our countries’ security and prosperity.

In the past 12 months, countries from all parts of the world that share this view have joined together. An Alliance for Multilateralism. Tomorrow more than 50 of my colleagues will be meeting here at the United Nations in New York to agree on concrete steps to strengthen international law and human rights, and for disarmament, crisis prevention, peacebuilding and global issues for the future such as cyber technology and climate change.

This is multilateralism in practice. This is sustainable foreign policy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sustainability is not a lofty discourse; it is not an elite approach that only the wealthy can afford.

On the contrary. We can no longer afford not to act sustainably.

Thank you very much.

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