“We’re building a firewall for the euro” (interview)

2011-11-08

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle talks to the Hamburger Abendblatt newspaper about the debt crisis in Europe, the Middle East conflict, the conflict over Iran’s nuclear programme and the transformation taking place in the countries of the Arab world. Published on 8 November 2011

Minister, how many years will it be before Europe is no longer a continent in crisis?

We are going to be busy with the debt crisis for a few years yet. That makes it all the more important that we undertake long-term structural changes within the

EU

. Weakening the Stability and Growth Pact has turned debt into an addictive drug in some countries. We need to replace the habit of accumulating debt with a union of genuine stability – and I think we can do it. Europe has always grown stronger from the crises it has faced.

What is your role, what is Germany’s role, in the new Europe?

Last year, the German Government brought in the biggest ever austerity package in the history of the Federal Republic. There was some pretty severe criticism, levelled not least against my party. However, it is partly thanks to the courage we showed then that we are in such a good position today, with Germany constituting the most important pillar of stability in Europe. If we hadn’t taken the resolute action we did, Germany would be far worse off than it is.

Things would be a lot easier without Greece. Was it a mistake to give Greece the euro?

We shouldn’t waste too much time looking to the past. What I want to see is a Stability and Growth Pact that has clout. Sanctions need to be an option when a country consistently contravenes the agreed criteria for stability. Any country that wants

EU

help needs to be prepared to hand over some of its sovereign rights in return, if it comes down to it.

Is Greece still a reliable partner for the

EU

?

Greece has launched some bold plans and deserves our support. Actions speak louder than words, though, and the

EU

has to insist on seeing them.

Would Greece be doing the

EU

a bigger favour by keeping the euro or giving it up?

I would caution against entering into that debate.

Others in your party have been engaged in it for some time.

Some may see Greece leaving the euro as an easy way out politically. However, the risk to our economy and to the

EU

would be huge. What we are doing now is building a firewall to make sure the whole of Europe doesn't go up in smoke. And we need more Europe, not less. Giving more precedence to national interests again is not the way for Europe to keep up with the new centres of power in the world. I am surprised to see how many people are still stuck in the old mindset, thinking of the world as if the West were still the only one calling the tune. We need to take the competition and partnerships seriously that are coming from the new centres of power – from China, India, Brazil and many more. Only together will Europe be strong enough for that arena.

[…]

So does it make sense to hold referenda on the euro?

When the day comes that we have a European Constitution, then all the people of Europe should vote on it. We need to engage in a European discussion about what direction we want to go in. I can well imagine having a President of the European Union elected by the people, one day.

[…]

Minister, which country are you more worried about at the moment: is it Iran, or is it Israel?

In Istanbul a few days ago, I was again urging Iran's Foreign Minister Salehi to cooperate with the international community in a comprehensible and transparent manner on his country's use of nuclear power. Iran has the right to civil use of nuclear power. At the same time, though, it has a responsibility to rule out its military use.

Israel is thinking aloud about attacking Iran. How reasonable do you find that?

I would warn against putting forward military options. Quite beyond all the dangerous repercussions for the region, those debates do more to strengthen the Iranian leadership than to weaken it.

Do the other foreign ministers in the West share your views on that?

My French counterpart has also expressed his concerns. Discussions among foreign ministers often turn to Iran, and in some depth. You have to understand, though, that we can't disclose everything we talk about.

What evidence does Germany have that Iran has nuclear weapons?

The International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna is responsible there. It is going to present a report in the next few days, which we will have to assess. We'll then need to decide our political and diplomatic response. What is already certain is that the international community won't just return to business as usual if Iran doesn't cooperate.

In Libya, the

NATO

mission has come to a successful conclusion following the death of Gaddafi. Do you regret that Germany isolated itself?

The German Government had good reasons not to get the Bundeswehr involved in the military operation, and the majority of

NATO

and

EU

member states did no different. We were never neutral, and right from the start we were doing what we could for a new democratic order.

Sharia law is being introduced in Libya, and Islamists have been elected in Tunisia. Is this the Arab Spring turning into an Islamist winter?

I have been working to support the transition ever since the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt started. That means much more than just getting rid of tyrants, though; it means really changing things to move towards democracy. My foreign policy is not just about pursuing interests. It is also guided by values. I was devastated by the recent clashes in Cairo, which caused the deaths of many Christians. The result of these great changes mustn't be an increase in fundamentalism and religious intolerance and repression.

Why is the international community keeping out of Syria?

We aren't keeping out of it. The Syrian regime is being successfully isolated internationally, thanks in part to eight rounds of sanctions from the European Union, including robust economic sanctions and an

EU

-wide ban on oil imports. We will be upping the pressure yet further in cooperation with the Arab League if the Assad regime doesn't stop deploying violence against its own people.

How long is the West going to sit back and watch President Assad's regime commit murder?

The West isn't sitting back and watching – and it isn't turning a blind eye either. People shouldn't underestimate how effective sanctions can be. What is more, there is danger in always calling for military intervention. My foreign policy is going to stay rooted in a culture of military restraint.

Mr Westerwelle, can you tell us how many German servicemen and women are going to have to spend Christmas in Afghanistan?

I would wish for everyone serving in Afghanistan to have Christmas with their families. But when we take decisions about the future of Germany's military involvement in Afghanistan, we can't be t

hinking about numbers of days – we need to think in terms of laying important groundwork for the future. We will be presenting the progress report on Afghanistan in the coming weeks and then putting a new mandate before the German Bundestag. What I think is crucial now is to hit the watershed moment in troop numbers and successfully negotiate this bend in the road of our Afghanistan policy. For the first time in ten years, we are not building up forces but reducing them. We need a political solution – which is what the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan, for example, is aiming for. One thing is clear: we intend to have handed over complete responsibility for security to Afghanistan, and withdrawn all German combat troops,

by the end of 2014. We are giving ourselves realistic goals to get us there. We can’t stay in Afghanistan until it becomes a kind of Switzerland in Central Asia.

This interview was conducted by Lars Haider, Matthias Iken and Karsten Kammholz and is reproduced here by kind permission of the Hamburger Abendblatt newspaper.

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