“The United States itself will suffer most”

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Interview by Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel with Spiegel Online (published on 8 June 2017) on US foreign policy, relations with Russia, the current situation in the Gulf and the relationship with Turkey.

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Mr Gabriel, you’ve just made some very critical remarks about US policy. Are you currently doing some robust electioneering on behalf of the SPD from your position as Foreign Minister?

Well, every politician is accused of doing that during an election year. And it would be almost reassuring if it was only the German election campaign that was prompting the CDU leader Angela Merkel or me as a Social Democrat to make critical remarks about the current US Administration. Then everyone in Germany and Europe could sleep better at night. Unfortunately, there are many objective reasons for the current critical discussion on the US Administration’s policies. There’s no doubt that Washington is pursuing policies in many areas which run contrary to what we in Germany and Europe believe is right.

Your tone vis-à-vis Donald Trump is noticeably tougher than that of your predecessor, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

My predecessor was lucky enough to be dealing with another US President and, more importantly, with different US policies.

After the United States announced it would be withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, you said that anyone who didn’t oppose US policy was making themselves complicit. That’s a pretty bold statement.

Well, we didn’t have to criticise President Obama for withdrawing his country from the Paris Agreement. On the contrary, after years during which any deal was blocked by the administration of his predecessor, George W. Bush, he made the United States a committed partner in climate protection. And just ask the countries affected by rapid desertification. For them climate protection is a matter of life and death. And, what’s more, a trigger for war and civil conflict over water and usable farmland.

That’s why you’ve been so critical?

Well, we're not inventing reasons to pick a fight with Mr Trump. There are problems in global politics which have been triggered by US policies. We have to deal with that.

Anti-American currents exist in equal measure both on the left and right of the political spectrum. Aren't you concerned you may be fuelling this with your comments?

You're quite right. There's a danger that disputes of this kind with the United States will fuel anti-American sentiments. However, the Chancellor, Martin Schulz and I are focusing on the substance of US positions. We're not indulging in heavy-handed opposition to America. Rather, we have different opinions from the current US Administration on important questions. But despite all the current differences, the United States remains the country to which we Germans and Europeans feel closer, both politically and culturally, than to any other.

Is the United States in the process of isolating itself on the international stage?

I hope not. The United States has demonstrated time and again that its democracy is very robust. Much more robust, by the way, than our own. Most importantly, the United States has always managed to re-establish an inner equilibrium. There's always a good chance that things will improve there. US Secretary of Defence James Mattis has just said that "America First" didn't mean "America Only".

What do you fear?

The United States itself would suffer most if it were to withdraw from the international arena. Alongside the concepts of democracy and human rights, the West is based on the idea that international cooperation is founded on reliable agreements, on the strength of the law and not on the law of the strongest. If the United States moves away from this idea to focus solely on itself, then others will try to take its place.

You mean China?

For example. There are therefore good reasons for the United States not to focus on national strength and move towards isolationism, for that will hurt it in the medium term.

You were in St Petersburg recently, where you spoke to President Putin. Did you get the impression that Putin is already disillusioned by the current zigzag course of US policies?

It's clear to the Russian leadership that ultimately there's only one true partner capable of helping it to modernise its economy – and that's Europe. My impression following my talks is that there is increasing awareness of this.

What about relations between Moscow and Washington?

Sensible relations between Russia and the United States are very much in our interest. Just take the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria as well as the recent developments in the Arabian Peninsula. We need both – for we Europeans cannot manage these conflicts on our own.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have broken off diplomatic relations with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism. Is there a danger that this will become the next hotspot in international politics?

I am alarmed by the escalation of the situation and the possible consequences for the entire region. A dispute among neighbours on the Arab Peninsula, using all means available, is the last thing we need given the many crises and conflicts in the Middle East.

In Saudi Arabia, Donald Trump signed one of the largest weapons deals in his nation's history and, at the same time, sharply criticised Iran. In the Syria conflict, Iran – which has just been the target of a terrorist attack – is on the side of Assad, who is also backed by Russia.

It cannot be in the interest of Russia to side with Iran on a long-term basis. And it certainly cannot be in Moscow's interest if Assad is one day so strong thanks to Iran's help that he no longer needs Moscow.

Do you really believe that the US Administration wants to uphold the nuclear agreement with Iran?

Fortunately, the US Administration hasn't terminated the agreement. So far, Washington has adhered to what was agreed, including those aspects relating to the easing of sanctions against Tehran. However, this can only continue if the Iranian side strictly abides by this agreement. The Americans won't tolerate any violations of the nuclear agreement by Tehran. That's clearly in Germany's interest, too.

Let's turn to Turkey. The withdrawal of German military forces from Incirlik in Turkey has been decided. The Tornados are to be transferred to Jordan. Does this mark the nadir in German-Turkish relations?

No. The nadir was the time when we were called Nazis. I hope the megaphone diplomacy is over. This must not happen again. Setting aside Incirlik, it's clear to me that we cannot station German soldiers where members of the Bundestag don't have the right to visit them.

Do you see any progress in the case of the journalist Deniz Yücel, who has been in solitary confinement for 100 days?

Not so far, unfortunately. We're hoping the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg will make a quick decision on this case, as it announced it would. And that the Turkish side will then accept – and implement – the ruling.

Why should President Erdogan, whom you met in Ankara, do that?

Because Ankara has cooperated with the court so far. Turkey and Europe need each other, President Erdogan is aware of that, too. We can only hope that this realisation will be translated into concrete policies again soon. The Yücel case would be a good place to start.

Interview conducted by Severin Weiland

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