



“Germany’s role in the world: Reflections on responsibility, norms and alliances”

**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the opening of the Munich Security Conference
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The five decades of the Munich Security Conference mirror a large part of the Federal Republic of Germany’s history: from the defence of the West to global governance and from military science to a comprehensive security concept. What a sweeping arc! When this Conference first took place here in Munich, Germany and its capital were divided and living under the shadow of the nuclear threat. Today we have to deal with new tensions and new wars: between states and within states, close to home and far away.

But that hasn’t changed the *raison d’être* of this Conference. Security remains vitally important, both to people and to nations. One of the strengths of open societies is that difficult and complex issues can also be debated in public – and that’s always been the tradition at the Munich Security Conference. For through all of its controversies, it helps to consolidate peace and security through dialogue.

Mr Ischinger,

Together with your predecessor Horst Teltschik and the founder Ewald von Kleist, you have made the Security Conference an outstanding forum and it has become a fixture in the diaries of foreign and security policy makers. I therefore gladly accepted your invitation to open this 50th Conference.

This milestone anniversary provides an opportunity to look back and above all, to look ahead. I’d therefore like to talk today about the path Germany has taken and where it could lead in future. For we

Germans are advancing towards a form of responsibility that has not yet become routine for us.

In a nutshell, I'd like to talk about Germany's role in the world.

Let me start by saying that this is a good Germany, the best we've ever had. And that's not mere rhetoric. When I was born, the National Socialists – who brought suffering and war to the world – were in power. When the Second World War ended, I was five years old. Our country was in ruins, both materially and morally. Just look at where Germany stands today: it's a stable democracy, free and peace loving, prosperous and open. It champions human rights. It's a reliable partner in Europe and the world: an equal partner with equal responsibilities. All of that fills me with profound gratitude and joy.

However, it's precisely because these are good times for Germany that we have to consider what we have to change today to preserve what is important to us tomorrow. Some people in Germany are asking what there is to change. They say that our country is surrounded by friends and that no country is seeking to become our enemy. They believe that Germany's foreign policy has long since found the right formula. That there is not much to adjust, never mind change. Why fix something if it isn't broken?

It's undoubtedly true that Germany's foreign policy has solid roots. Its most important achievement is that Germany, with the help of its partners, has turned a past blighted by war and dominance into a present marked by peace and cooperation. This includes the reconciliation with our neighbours, our commitment to European integration as a national goal, as well as our partnership with the United States as the cornerstone of the North Atlantic Alliance. Germany advocates a security concept which is based on values and encompasses respect for human rights. In our foreign policy vocabulary, free trade and peace go hand in hand, as do the exchange of goods and prosperity.

Germany is globalised more than most countries and thus benefits more than most from an open world order – a world order which allows Germany to reconcile interests with fundamental values. Germany derives its most important foreign policy goal in the 21st century from all of this: preserving this order and system and making them fit for the future.

Pursuing this core interest while the world around us is undergoing sweeping changes is the major challenge of our age. If there has been one constant factor during the last few years, then it's the fact that the speed of change has always been underestimated. Futurologists are amazed time and again that changes in the world become reality much more quickly than they had forecast. This also has an impact on our security: at a faster pace than we had ever

imagined, we are entering a world in which individuals can buy a quantity of destructive power which was the preserve of states in earlier times. A world in which economic and political power is shifting and causing entire regions to build up their military forces. In the Middle East, there is a danger that individual crises will converge and engulf the whole region. At this very moment, the world's only superpower is reconsidering the scale and form of its global engagement. Europe, its partner, is busy navel gazing. I don't believe that Germany can simply carry on as before in the face of these developments.

For some time now, it's been impossible to ignore the fact that this change is gradually gnawing away at German certainties. We're committed to the European idea. However, Europe's crisis has made us feel uncertain. We're also committed to NATO. However, we've been debating for years about the direction the Alliance should take, and we've done nothing to stop the depletion of its financial resources. We're not calling the alliance with the United States into question. But we have observed symptoms of stress and uncertainty about the future. We have great respect for the rules based world of the United Nations. However, we can't ignore the crisis in multilateralism. We'd like to see the new players on the world stage as participants in a global order. However, some of them are seeking a place on the margins rather than at the heart of the system. We feel surrounded by friends, but hardly know how to deal with diffuse security threats such as the privatisation of power by terrorists and cyber criminals. We rightly complain when allies overstep the mark when they use electronic surveillance to detect threats. And yet, we prefer to remain reliant on them and hesitate to improve our own surveillance capacities.

This means that simply repeating familiar mantras won't be enough in future! For the key question is: has Germany already adequately recognised the new threats and the changing structure of the international order? Has it reacted commensurate with its weight? Has Germany shown enough initiative to ensure the future viability of the network of norms, friends and alliances which has after all brought us peace in freedom and democracy in prosperity?

Some people at home and abroad have a quick and somewhat simplistic answer: they regard Germany as the shirker in the international community. They say that Germany is all too ready to duck difficult issues. This criticism should be countered first of all with facts and then with a pinch of historical perspective.

After the Second World War, initially no one – neither abroad nor within Germany – wanted our country to play a strong international role. Furthermore, there were two German states which were both, to differing extents, only partially sovereign. Since reunification, Germany

has embarked upon a new course. Step by step, our country has transformed itself from a beneficiary to a guarantor of international order and security. First of all, I want to mention development cooperation. Germany is investing large sums in this sphere because it wants to help build stable and secure societies. Second, Germany is doing much to take the world into a resource efficient future. And third, few other countries are doing more to promote international institutions. Fourth, Germany has on occasion participated in military missions. Fifth, what the Federal Republic has done to help Europe grow together and overcome the recent crisis is truly impressive.

Those are the facts. And yet not all critics of German policy are quite simply unfair. Some differentiate and highlight subtle nuances, and such criticism often has a core of truth. Germany has already been travelling along the road towards becoming a guarantor of the international order and security for 24 years now. It's a difficult walk along a winding road. However, those who believe that very small steps are the best will find it difficult to keep up with the rapid change in threats and will be unable to do justice to the dramatic shifts in the strategic environment.

Let me ask a few leading questions. Are we doing what we could do to stabilise our neighbourhood, both in the East and in Africa? Are we doing what we have to in order to counter the threat of terrorism? And, in cases where we have found convincing reasons to join our allies in taking even military action, are we willing to bear our fair share of the risks? Are we doing what we should to attract new or reinvigorated major powers to the cause of creating a just world order for tomorrow? Do we even evince the interest in some parts of the world which is their due, given their importance? What role do we want to play in the crises afflicting distant parts of the globe? Are we playing an active enough role in that field in which the Federal Republic of Germany has developed such expertise? I am speaking, of course, of conflict prevention. In my opinion, Germany should make a more substantial contribution, and it should make it earlier and more decisively if it is to be a good partner.

Germany has long since demonstrated that it acts in an internationally responsible way. But it could – building on its experience in safeguarding human rights and the rule of law – take more resolute steps to uphold and help shape the order based on the European Union, NATO and the United Nations. At the same time, Germany must also be ready to do more to guarantee the security that others have provided it with for decades.

Now, some people in my country consider "international responsibility" to be a euphemism, veiling what's really at stake. Germany would have to pay more, some people think; Germany would have to send in more soldiers, others say. And they are all convinced

that “more responsibility” primarily means more trouble. You will not be surprised to hear that I see things differently.

Politicians always have to take responsibility for their actions. But they also have to live with the consequences of their omissions. He who fails to act bears responsibility, too. We would be deceiving ourselves if we were to believe that Germany was an island and thus protected from the vicissitudes of our age. For few other countries have such close links with the rest of the world as Germany does. Germany has thus benefited from the open global order. And it’s vulnerable to any disruptions to the system. For this reason, the consequences of inaction can be just as serious, if not worse than the consequences of taking action.

In this context, I would like to repeat what I said on 3 October, the Day of German Unity. We cannot hope to be spared from the world’s conflicts. But if we contribute to solving them, we can take a hand at least in shaping the future. It is thus worth Germany’s while to invest properly in European cooperation and in the global order.

Of course, it’s true that solving problems can cost money, sometimes lots of money. But we have shown, in the European crisis and elsewhere, that we are willing to go to great lengths to fulfil Alliance commitments and provide support, because doing so is ultimately also in our own interest.

Sometimes it can even be necessary to send in the troops. If there’s one thing we’ve learned from Afghanistan, it’s that the Bundeswehr mission was necessary, but it could never have been more than a single element in any overall strategy. Germany will never support any purely military solution, but will approach issues with political judiciousness and explore all possible diplomatic options. However, when the last resort – sending in the Bundeswehr – comes to be discussed, Germany should not say “no” on principle. Nor should it say “yes” unthinkingly.

I have to admit that while there are genuine pacifists in Germany, there are also people who use Germany’s guilt for its past as a shield for laziness or a desire to disengage from the world. In the words of the German historian Heinrich August Winkler, this is an attitude that grants Germany a questionable “right to look the other way, which other Western democracies” cannot claim for themselves. Restraint can thus be taken too far if people start making special rules for themselves. Whenever that happens, I will criticise it. For it is crystal clear to me that we need NATO. And it is precisely at times when the United States cannot keep on providing more and more that Germany and its European partners must themselves assume greater responsibility for their security.

Furthermore, it should today be natural for Germany and its allies to not simply refuse to help others when human rights violations multiply and result in genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity. Not only do all Western democracies consider respect for human rights to be one of their defining features, it is also a cornerstone of any guarantee of security, of a peaceful and cooperative world order.

Brutal regimes must not be allowed to hide behind the principles of state sovereignty and non intervention. This is where the concept of "responsibility to protect" comes to bear. This concept transfers to the international community the responsibility to protect the people of a given country from such atrocities when their own government fails to assume that responsibility. In the very last resort, military means can be used, after careful consideration and after a weighing up of the consequences, upon authorisation by the UN Security Council.

I know, and like human rights defenders around the world I am pained by the fact that action is not taken everywhere where such intervention would be morally justified and necessary to protect the life and limb of people in danger. This dilemma has recently been highlighted again by events in Syria. And I know that the relationship between legality and legitimacy will continue to be awkward as long as the Security Council is so often divided on these issues.

There will be many reasons why the concept of responsibility to protect rarely results in an intervention. The consequences of such action are frequently difficult or even impossible to calculate. There is no way of determining accurately enough whether the situation in the crisis area will be better after military intervention. Sometimes domestic policy considerations will also militate against action. Whatever the precise circumstances, the decision whether to intervene or not will always be a morally difficult one.

The UN General Assembly has in principle recognised the concept of responsibility to protect. However, the concept remains contentious and, as we all know, the international debate on this subject continues. That's a good thing, since potential abuse of the concept for expansionist or imperialist purposes has to be ruled out. I therefore welcome the fact that the German Government is helping to further develop the concept, with a focus on prevention, international cooperation and the development of early warning systems.

So, will Germany reap "more trouble" if it plays a more active role? There are indeed commentators who think that a Germany that shows initiative will inevitably experience friction with its friends and neighbours. But this assumption is, I think, based on a misconception. "More responsibility" really does not mean "more throwing our weight around". Nor does it mean "more going it alone"! On the contrary, by cooperating with other countries, particularly within the European

Union, Germany gains influence. Germany would in fact benefit from even more cooperation. Perhaps this could even lead to the establishment of a common European defence. In our interconnected world, there are problems that no country can solve on its own, however powerful it may be. The ability and willingness to cooperate are thus becoming the defining trademark of international politics. In line with this, responsibility is always shared responsibility.

As a globally plugged in economy, Germany has no alternative but to find partners, be considerate and make compromises. Germany has long known that it must guard against going its own special way. A democracy must, of course, have the right to remain on the sidelines occasionally. But such a step should be well considered and should remain the exception. Going it alone has its price.

Of course, if you act, you are open to criticism. We saw that during the European crisis when Germany took the initiative. Old resentments were quick to surface, both within and outside Germany. However, I dread to think of the wave of outrage that would have been sparked had Germany not taken action at that time of European need.

I am most firmly convinced that a Germany which reaches out more to the world will be an even better friend and an even better ally – above all in Europe.

To find its proper course in these difficult times, Germany needs resources, above all intellectual resources – minds, institutions and forums. A Security Conference once a year in Munich – that's to be welcomed, but it's not enough. I wonder if it isn't time for the universities to offer more than a mere handful of chairs where German foreign policy can be analysed. Doesn't research on security issues need to be invigorated, to boost work on matters such as defence against cyber attacks by criminals or by intelligence services?

Nor is it a good sign that younger members of the German Bundestag feel that focusing on foreign and security policy is not beneficial to their careers. By the way, the German Bundestag has held some 240 debates on overseas deployments of the Bundeswehr since 1994. These debates have been conducted in a manner that truly deserves respect. However, in the same period, parliament has held fewer than ten fundamental debates on German foreign and security policy. But we need such debates – in the Bundestag and indeed everywhere: in the churches and trade unions, in the Bundeswehr, in the political parties and in all kinds of associations.

For foreign policy should not be a matter reserved for specialists or for the elite – and security policy definitely should not be. Basic existential issues should be a matter for reflection in the heart of society. Matters that affect everyone should be discussed by everyone. International events keep pushing us towards such a debate – the

latest examples being the events in Mali and the Central African Republic. The fact that Germany's new Foreign Minister wants to re-examine his Ministry's policies – and put them up for discussion – squares nicely with the aspiration to open this debate. Frank-Walter Steinmeier wants to seek dialogue with academia and with civil society. This would be a step towards a new understanding of society by society. Talking about where, how and when we should seek to defend our values and our security will gradually give us greater clarity about the extent and aims of Germany's international involvement.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the foreign guests at the Munich Security Conference for the trust their countries placed in West Germany at a time when many of their contemporaries still considered it a gamble.

However, to conclude, I would like to request something of us Germans. I would like to request that, as a basic rule, we too trust this fundamentally reformed country of ours. The post-war generations had good reasons to be distrustful – of the German state and of German society. But the time for such categorical distrust is past. Let me close the circle and come back to what I noted at the start. The Federal Republic of Germany has lived in peace with all its neighbours for more than six decades. Civil and human rights have been upheld for six decades. The rule of law has prevailed for six decades. Prosperity and security are among this country's defining features. Germany has a vibrant civil society which identifies errors and can help to correct them.

There has never been an era like this in the history of our nation, not ever. This is also why we are now permitted to have confidence in our abilities and should trust in ourselves. For we know that only people who trust in themselves gain the strength to reach out to the world. People who trust in themselves can be relied on by their partners.

In the past, when the Germans put their country above everything, "über alles", as the national anthem proclaimed, a form of nationalism evolved that progressed through all the phases of an unenlightened sense of national identity, from forced self-assurance to self-delusion to hubris. Our affirmation of our nation today is based on all the things that make this country credible and trustworthy – including its commitment to cooperation with our European and North Atlantic friends. We should not trust in ourselves because we are the German nation, but because we are this German nation.

Let us thus not turn a blind eye, not run from threats, but instead stand firm, let us not forget, neglect or, worse, betray universal values, but instead uphold them together with our friends and partners. Let us be seen to be living by them, let us defend them.