



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a gathering with German soldiers, representatives of
international forces and civilian personnel
in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan
on 13 July 2017**

I am truly delighted to be with you here today. I do not know how many trips I have made to Camp Marmal. At some point I stopped counting. That was partly due to the realisation that this mission has lasted much longer, and has taken a different course, than the political representatives who initiated it ever imagined, or could have imagined, more than fifteen years ago.

I am here to tell you that we have not forgotten this conflict and that we should pay tribute to what you are doing here, and what you have accomplished, in a joint effort with all those who preceded you. In saying this, I also mean those who could not be here today because they are serving elsewhere in Afghanistan.

Whenever I speak with soldiers about their operations, diplomats report to me on the political situation, or development experts inform me about their successes and difficulties in implementing projects in Afghanistan, I am always impressed by the great dedication, courage, professionalism and strength with which you have been performing your duties for many years and in extremely challenging conditions.

I am aware that the road has been more difficult than was originally hoped. Indeed, the situation is even more difficult than our stated goals – which have become much more sober over time – would suggest. Almost no one expected the transfer of security responsibility to Afghan national forces and the redeployment of most international troops to go smoothly. However, the security situation in the country – not everywhere, but in certain regions – has deteriorated in some places. That is evident every day to you, to international aid workers but, of course, most particularly to many Afghans. The most recent attacks have been truly shocking, in terms of both magnitude and brutality. I am thinking of the devastating attack in Kabul on 31 May,

of the massacre of your Afghan comrades at Camp Shaheen, of the attack on the German consulate here in Mazar, as well as of the Taliban's multiple assaults on the city of Kunduz. These developments in some places are more than sobering.

We must admit to ourselves that some of our hopes back then for the transformation were too optimistic. We also have to admit that although we are able to influence developments from the outside and set things on the right track, this influence is limited.

Yes, we have suffered setbacks, but we must not pass judgement too easily. For many of you, this is not your first tour of duty in Afghanistan. Those who have been to this country before may recall the abyss of civil war, terrorism, and complete collapse of all state structures that this country had fallen into. You will recognise that much progress has been gradually made. We should neither forget nor play down this fact. A keen awareness of progress, especially among the younger generation of Afghans, also gives cause for hope. We have just come from Kabul. Of course, we saw the site of the devastation, the destroyed Embassy, there. But outside the city centre we also saw many building sites, many new residential areas, which show that young Afghans are busy building their own future. Without all of you, ladies and gentlemen, soldiers – without you their hope of a future in their own country would fade away. Without you, any chance of a peaceful future for the entire country would fade away. That is what makes, and continues to make, your mission important.

I came to speak with President Ghani about the steps that are needed and can be taken toward a serious and credible peace process in Afghanistan. My message to him today was: Germany is prepared to continue to support Afghanistan, together with our international partners. Afghanistan, however, must do more to give this mission a realistic chance of success. Because the future of this country is not primarily in the hands of Germany, NATO or international donors. It is first and foremost in the hands of the Government of Afghanistan, and it hinges on the government's efforts to unite this divided country. None of this will be possible without the acceptance of a central government in Kabul, without a political settlement with the various ethnic and religious groups, including the Taliban. That is part of the reality which we, but above all political leaders in Afghanistan, have to recognise. Your presence here cannot take the place of a political settlement. Your presence can only create both time and space for a political settlement, one that Afghans themselves must both desire and work out. Nothing more – but also nothing less.

To our fellow international soldiers here at Camp Marmal, I want to pay my respect for your exceptional service alongside our German troops, our diplomats and aid workers. We are truly grateful for your joint efforts to train, assist and advise the Afghan forces. Your

dedication helps provide the space and time for a political settlement that shall allow a more peaceful future for Afghanistan. Be assured that your professionalism and your solidarity are deeply appreciated by Germany. We rely on you – you can rely on us. Thank you all!

Ladies and gentlemen, soldiers, I am here to remember all those who have lost their lives in Afghanistan. My thoughts are also with those who still bear the scars of their service in Afghanistan.

This mission has changed our image of the most lethal instrument that our country can employ. Today, Bundeswehr servicewomen and men no longer serve exclusively in a national defence or NATO capacity, as two generations of citizens in uniform before them did. Bundeswehr missions abroad – and this includes your civilian colleagues – are part of a new reality; a reality which has changed your tasks, your jobs and, above all, the conditions under which you do these jobs.

With your mission, you are playing an active role in the efforts of the international community. You serve side by side with civilian aid workers. Your service is part of a tradition of peacekeeping. In this way, you are also helping those who cannot count on the support of their own state. You are fighting a form of terrorism that is afflicting the world – including our country.

Here in Afghanistan, you are standing up for the values that are enshrined in our Basic Law. As part of the effort to defend our country's values and promote our interests, you are prepared to take great personal risks. This is by no means self-evident. For that reason, your job is no ordinary job.

You are members of a Bundeswehr that, thanks to its professionalism and exemplary attitude – as well as its courage – has earned the respect of the Afghans and of our international partners.

Our engagement in Afghanistan remains a long-term effort. However, you have every reason to regard your efforts with pride and self-confidence.

Maybe we cannot ultimately expect 100 percent of people in Germany to fully support every mission. Debate, including critical debate, is part and parcel of democracy. This also applies to current discussions about the general situation within the Bundeswehr.

However, we have to make sure that we are all talking about the same thing. We must see to it that the Bundeswehr and our civilian society do not discuss this matter separately, but that they instead engage in a joint debate. In a democracy, it is crucial that the armed forces and civilian society never grow apart. Politicians are responsible for ensuring that.

However, you can expect – indeed you should expect – a large majority of Germans to back the Bundeswehr, which is democratically mandated, along with the mission it is performing in a difficult environment. I am here to tell you that you not only deserve this support – the support of the Federal President and that of the vast majority of Germans – but that you have it. I want to take this opportunity to express my respect and my profound thanks for what you are doing. Germany can be proud of what you are accomplishing here together.

Thank you very much!