



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the Munich Security Conference
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The world today is not the same as it was in 2014. Six years ago exactly, you see, I spoke here in this room about Germany's foreign policy responsibility and how it had to prove its validity. Much has changed since then. Above all, though – and this is probably the reason for this year's conference theme – the "we" of "the West" that was once a given is clearly no longer something that can be taken entirely for granted. This is true both within our societies, but also in relation to the existential issues of foreign and security policy on which this conference focuses.

As you are unlikely to have invited me here today to weave a few more diplomatic threads, I would like to talk about how today's world appears from the German vantage point. Now, I am no longer a regular guest at this meeting, and diplomacy is no longer my bread and butter. So I hope you will not only forgive me for speaking plainly on some points, but that you might in fact even be expecting me to do so.

This year we are commemorating the end, 75 years ago, of that most destructive of all wars. A war which Germany unleashed and waged, particularly in Eastern Europe, as a war of annihilation. Two weeks ago, at Yad Vashem and then at Auschwitz, we commemorated the liberation 75 years ago of the most murderous of the concentration camps. Without that war and without Auschwitz, the inner and outer face of today's Germany would be inconceivable. Germany's view of the world cannot be explained without reference to those experiences.

"I wish I could say that the lesson we Germans have learnt from history is a lesson that will last forever. But I cannot say that when hatred and hate speech are spreading." That is what I said at Yad Vashem. Today the evil spirits of the past – ethnocentric thinking,

racism, antisemitism – are emerging in a new guise, in our country too. And they are starting to poison public debate once again. So we – in Germany, but by no means only in Germany – are called upon as a society once again. We are called upon to defend our elementary understanding of the dignity of the individual and actually to fight for our open societies.

This year we will be reflecting on another 75th anniversary. The constituent assembly of the United Nations was held in San Francisco 75 years ago. The catastrophe of excessive nationalism afforded lessons and conclusions, not only for my country: a joint organisation of all states to assume responsibility for peace and security; then a system of free trade and financial support in the newly established institutions of the Bretton Woods system. There followed a Universal Declaration of Human Rights which imposed high standards on all states, also in relations with their own citizens. Standards which were then extended over the ensuing decades to include civil, economic and social rights. True, much of this remained a lofty goal, far removed from reality. Nonetheless, the international order we built up from that foundation – in Helsinki in 1975, in the midst of the Cold War, and with the Charter of Paris following the end of the Cold War 30 years ago – all this offered stability, orientation and hope in what had long been an anarchical assortment of states.

I wish I could say that as an international community, too, we have learnt an enduring lesson from history, after 1945 and after 1989. But I fear we are currently witnessing an increasingly destructive dynamic in international politics. Year by year, we are moving further and further away from the goal – international cooperation in order to create a more peaceful world. The idea of the “great power competition” is not only influencing the strategy papers of today; it is also shaping the new reality all across the world, and the tracks can be followed right to the unending wars with huge loss of life in the Middle East and Libya.

Russia, rightly or wrongly offended and alienated, not only annexed Crimea in total disregard of international law. It turned military force and the violent redrawing of borders on the European continent into political instruments again. The result is uncertainty and unpredictability, confrontation and lost trust.

Thanks to its impressive rise, China has become an important actor in the international institutions as well, becoming indispensable for the protection of global public goods. At the same time, it is selective in accepting international law only where it does not run counter to its own interests. Its actions in the South China Sea are unsettling the neighbours in the region. Its actions against minorities in the country disturb us all.

And under its current Administration, our closest ally, the United States of America, rejects the very concept of an international community. As if the "let everyone tend his own garden" attitude were enough as global policy. As if everyone thinking of himself meant that everyone were being considered. "Great again" – if necessary, even at the expense of neighbours and partners. At least that's how it looks.

It is indeed true that international law primarily protects the small. The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must. Not my words, but a comment on the ancient world from Thucydides over 2000 years ago. In other words: whilst laws and rules are of extreme importance to the "little man", they are always merely an option for the great. They, it appears, have other ways to survive.

But, if you look closely, that's not entirely true. Because thinking and acting this way hurts us all. Firstly, it casts us back to an age in which everyone sought to ensure his own security at the expense of others. In this scenario, the security of one is the insecurity of the other. We fall back into the classic security dilemma familiar to us all. The inevitable result? More mistrust, more armament, ultimately less security. Possibly even a new nuclear arms race that will produce not only more weapons, but above all more nuclear powers, with all the risks that entails for an already precarious nuclear stability. In addition, there are countless regional conflicts which medium sized and small powers believe they can resolve themselves, because the large powers don't take the rules so seriously any more and no longer act as guarantors and guardians of the old world order.

But the damage goes much further than that. This withdrawal to concentrate on a narrowly defined national interest prevents us from taking joint action and coming up with convincing answers to the issues and problems that no one, not even the biggest nation state on Earth, can solve alone. This way of thinking is worse than a return to the past: it is worse because it robs us of our future in this closely interconnected world. It damages the institutions and instruments we absolutely need to tackle the major issues facing humanity. Climate change mitigation is but one of them. But climate change mitigation in particular makes it clearer by the day that the repercussions aren't just felt by small states. A blinkered or short sighted national view will eventually cost even the biggest of us dear. All over the world, our children's and grandchildren's generation will pay a high price for our failure to act and for nations going it alone, undermining joint action to combat climate change.

That is why we must be so worried by a phenomenon that is obvious to everyone in this, the 75th anniversary year of the end of the Second World War: the institutions and authorities which were supposed to help us overcome our different traditions and interests and translate them into viable compromises are being deliberately

weakened – in particular, the authority of these institutions is being deliberately weakened. Because the United Nations Security Council is deadlocked on central issues; agreed and ratified conventions are simply being terminated; dispute settlement bodies are being paralysed as no new judges are being appointed. In short: trust that will take years and decades to be re established is being put at risk and eroded. This is not a new way of thinking, I may say, but a relapse into old patterns of thinking. And let me add this: it is extremely dangerous.

I am well aware that international community is not something that can be taken for granted. In most instances it is more goal than reality. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that the idea of international community is not outmoded. For we are the first generation to live in an age in which humanity can irreversibly change the living conditions on the planet. At a time like this, withdrawing into our national shells leads us into a dead end, into a truly dark age. Only the concept of a global order – and only that – offers the opportunity to formulate persuasive answers to the challenges of the Anthropocene. That is why we must continue our efforts to create, to further develop, a supranational legal order. It would be dangerous for all of us, big and small, to abandon this ambition or to shrug it off as an idealistic fantasy. And if you don't believe me, then believe Henry Kissinger: years ago he gave the sum of his experience and said that today's world needs a concept of order that goes beyond the perspectives and ideals of individual regions and nations. A more precise, apposite or modern description of the job of foreign and security policy today would be impossible to find. That sums it up exactly.

Let me turn now to Germany. Today many Germans observing international politics feel irritated, unsettled, anxious. We Germans like to think that if everyone was as just sensible as us, then everything would be fine. That, however, is, I know, overly simplistic. Germany, too, is being tested now.

This year, we will be celebrating the 30th anniversary of reunification – at the time, an unbelievable and unexpected stroke of good fortune, particularly as it was associated with the reunification of Europe, which had been divided by the Iron Curtain. "Felix Germania" – at one with the world, surrounded by friends, secure in the global "Pax Americana". That's how it was. And that is the framework at risk of crumbling before our very eyes. As yet, there is no indication of what might replace it. But it is clear that the hope that others will somehow sort it out for us is a vain one, for us Germans at least.

For the first time in its history, Germany is surrounded solely by friends. That's true. And it is a source of happiness. But sometimes happiness can also make one blind. That true sentence, dating from the early 1990s, has occasionally blinded us to the fact that our

neighbours see the world differently from us, that they are closer to very acute troublespots than we are, that they feel an existential danger.

We Germans, perhaps like others as well, like to think of ourselves as the best Europeans. We tell ourselves that we are particularly generous towards our partners and that we do our utmost to take their interests into account. We also like to believe that we have learned the lessons of European history more thoroughly than anyone else. But when we look at the European Union today, what we see is economic divergence, not convergence. We see political, and increasingly also ideological, divides within the European Union. If I am seeing correctly, Europe has not grown closer together. And presumably the responsibility for that doesn't lie only with everyone else.

And so the question we too are asking is this: Do we really always behave in the way our speeches on "Europe, a community with a common destiny" would in fact require? Is this how we behave in security and defence policy, or in the economic and monetary union? In many issues, we see ourselves differently from how others see us. Germany often believes that it is being helpful and demonstrating solidarity, whereas others reproach us for tending to pursue our national interests. This is true of dealing with external threats as well as for issues relating to solidarity and consensus building within the European Union.

And it is not only internal differences that are causing difficulties for Europe. In the year 2020, unlike before, we can no longer assume that the great powers have an interest in seeing successful European integration. On the contrary. If I might speak plainly: each of the major players is pursuing its own advantage, if necessary even at the expense of Europe's unity – and that is not a good development for us.

Or, to come at it from the other direction: this Europe must not be allowed to fail. For what is Germany's national interest today, 30 years after the most important constitutional goal – reunification – became reality? The answer, for us Germans, is actually still to be found in the Basic Law, our constitution: "to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe".

For Germany, Europe is not something that is merely nice to have or important when other partnerships wilt. No, it is our strongest, our most fundamental national interest. Today and tomorrow, Europe is the indispensable framework for us to assert ourselves in the world. At the same time, 75 years on from the end of the war, Europe is and will remain the only successful response to the challenges posed by our history and by geography. If the European project fails, the lessons of German history, but perhaps also European history, will be called into question.

It is these two considerations taken together that make Europe so vitally important for us. Only in and through Europe was Germany able to stop oscillating over centuries between rampant power politics and cultural hubris. This united Europe will only survive if we regard it as the most concrete repository for German responsibility. Here at this conference, which is devoted to security issues, I wish to say this quite openly: of all the dangers I sense facing Germany, I see none greater than that our German narrative of the future dispenses with the united Europe, whether as a result of a lack of insight, because of indifference, or in some cases even intentionally.

Now you are wondering, and rightly so: what does this mean? How should we approach Europe and the world? Above all else – this is my advice to ourselves – we need to adapt mentally to a changing reality, to a new reality. Otherwise we will lose touch with Europe and thus also our ability to shape events. The realistic view of the world I am advocating does not call for resignation, and certainly not cynicism; rather, I am advocating realism and curiosity, occasionally also a touch of humility.

In Germany in particular, we believed, supposedly with good reason, that the post Cold War world revolved around the European sun, that the legacy of the European Enlightenment must in fact be the focal point for all social development, and that some were perhaps just a bit late in getting there. But some of these assumptions have, as we know, proven overly optimistic. They have led us to overestimate ourselves. They have led to a stance that too often manifests itself in moral condemnation, a stance in which morally guided positions are sometimes more likely to close rather than open our eyes to the necessity and actual possibilities of our actions. One important lesson here lies in realising that even our possibilities are limited, but not sinking into despair. We, Germany, and we, the West, cannot shape the world in our own image. And so we must not overburden our foreign policy with the expectation that it will bring salvation. When I talk of humility, however, I certainly do not mean a reluctance to take on responsibility – anything but. On the contrary. The job of a prudent foreign policy is and must be to prevent wars, defuse conflicts and lessen suffering through courage and drive. Its task is also to seek normative understanding to safeguard humanity's key life resources – but without expecting ever to be able to ensure complete global harmony.

The second virtue we Germans should rediscover is curiosity. If everyone supposedly is becoming like us – or at least wants to become like us – then we might wonder why should we care about others' particular qualities, history and traditions, fears and priorities? Today, at a time when internal and external are becoming increasingly intermeshed in all societies, when domestic debate determines the room for manoeuvre in foreign policy, we must once again rediscover a

far greater interest in what drives our partners, our competitors and, yes, even our opponents, in the roots of their ambition, but also in the reasons for their fears.

It is after all true that countless Germans are committed to and engaged in international cooperation. On many trips, I have been able to witness a great degree of personal commitment to fighting poverty and inequality and to building a better world. That goes particularly of course for the young generation. And yet, what I miss in many of our national debates is a genuine openness to the outside, a desire to make the effort to understand others. Instead, we often resort to the very human but nonetheless unrealistic longing for clarity, often with a straightforward black/white or friend/enemy scheme of things: others do things differently from us – wrongly, in other words. I am certainly not advising naivety. But conflicts cannot be resolved if we are not familiar with the other side's perspectives or interests, especially where they run counter to our own ideas. Without such an understanding, it will be impossible in future to negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran, and there will be no peace in eastern Ukraine. If you want to make peace in Libya, you have to shake a great many hands, not all of them clean. Whoever wants to combat terrorism in the Sahel region – and Germany has a few years' experience in Mali – cannot simply make it a case of "military – yes or no?", but must above all tackle the complex causes of the conflict on the ground to successfully ensure stability. There can be no conflict resolution, far less understanding, otherwise.

With this realism, openness and curiosity about others' thinking, Germany should face up to the biggest responsibility resting on our country: namely to hold the united Europe together.

With regard to security policy, I regard our country as having a dual responsibility. For Germany, the development of an EU capable of action in defence policy is as crucial as the expansion of the European pillar of NATO. Future scenarios often suggest that Germany needs to choose one or the other. Frankly, I believe that would be a short sighted strategy.

To put it quite clearly: if we want to keep this Europe together, on security issues too, then it is not enough to make the European Union alone stronger in terms of security policy and the military; rather, we must, I am convinced, also continue to invest in our transatlantic links. Or I could echo the French President in saying that it is not a question of whether we want to defend ourselves with or without Washington and that Europe's security is based on a strong alliance with America. Furthermore, many of our Central and Eastern European partners see their existential security there first and foremost, in the transatlantic relationship. Irrespective of all the progress made – and I am not disputing that there has been progress – the European Union is a long way from being able to guarantee the

security of all its members by itself. And to count solely on the EU would be to drive a wedge through Europe. Conversely, however, only a Europe that can and wants to protect itself credibly will be able to keep the US in the Alliance. I feel that this insight is lacking in some of the debates here in Germany, but also elsewhere in Europe. One aspect of our German responsibility is to take seriously the worries and interests of the nations of Central Europe, to attach importance to them, and to act accordingly. At the same time, irrespective of how or where we attribute the causes, Europe cannot and must not accept Russia's increasing alienation in the long term. We need a different relationship, a better relationship, between the EU and Russia and between Russia and the EU. But I say this here because the necessary reflection on our future relations with Russia cannot take place without or at the expense of the countries and peoples of Central Europe. But this reflection really does need to take place, and I ask that it does.

Another thing that has to be said is that Europe is no longer as vital to the US as it used to be. We must guard against the illusion that the United States' dwindling interest in Europe is solely down to the current Administration. This accusation from Europe would be unjustified. For we know that this shift began a while ago, and it will continue even after this Administration. The new centre of gravity for American interests, or perhaps I should say American challenges, lies in Asia.

However, I want to take this opportunity to say this: we in Germany are hoping for an America that once again regards European integration – as it did over the past few decades, and rightly so – as an extremely valuable and above all connective project. That's what counts. That is the view I advocate for on my trips to the US and in many conversations with Americans in Germany. And I am delighted that this year again such a strong American delegation has come to Munich, to this conference which has always been a forum for transatlantic debate.

Germany must contribute more to European security, also within NATO, including financially. The Alliance has agreed a joint goal to this end. I believe it is correct and necessary to try to attain this goal. But let's be honest, in this forum too – let's be honest: even if every country in Europe, including Germany, were to spend far more than two percent of its GDP on defence, we would not be able to stop, far less reverse, the erosion of the international order we have been seeing over the past couple of years. Again, to prevent any misunderstanding: I am not criticising the benchmark. I am not criticising the two percent mark. Far from it. I think it is correct. But do let's make sure we don't make that the be all and end all for peace and security in our future. We cannot compensate for the loss of diplomacy, of essential pillars of our security architecture, of arms control agreements and international agreements, with tanks, fighter

jets and intermediate range missiles. We should abandon these overly simple categories from debates in the recent past. At this conference, too, I hope. For the opposite is true: if we do not find our way back to a situation where everyone respects international law; if we do not repair the damage done to the world order, a world order we set up ourselves; if we do not learn again to integrate others' security into our own security strategies; if we do not orient foreign policy precisely to these tasks – then in a few years we will have armed ourselves globally to the hilt, to the detriment of all. Finding and taking another, wiser path is the task of each and every one of us, it is our common responsibility.

No one must be allowed to refuse to join in seeking a better path. However, as a result of the post war order, the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council share a special privilege, but also a special responsibility, a special responsibility for peace, security and disarmament. Emmanuel Macron is right in calling with his initiative for their – the P5's – resolve, their action, to meet precisely this responsibility again in this dramatically changing world. And returning to these tasks is a matter of urgency, because the P5 have privileges that are justified, as long as they preserve or promote a world order that goes beyond their own interests. But not if they are indifferent or hostile to this order, or if they consistently undermine it in pursuing their foreign policy.

Germany's responsibility has a different basis. But we must be measured by it as well. What we need, alongside improved capabilities, is an honest analysis of Germany's security situation and a credible desire actually to help Europe to assert its interests. Only a European foreign and security policy designed for effective action will allow us to make a credible contribution towards preserving the international order. The military instrument is indispensable for our security, but is neither the first choice nor the most likely to deliver success when it comes to the diplomatic and political capability to act. Europe must invent its own answer to the seminal shifts in spheres of power and influence I have described, to the new political and military heavyweights on the international stage. It must formulate a truly European policy on Russia that is not restricted merely to condemnatory statements and sanctions. It must find its own balance with China, finding an equilibrium between increasing inter system competition and the necessary cooperation, while also – and this is even harder – taking the many other strong partners in Asia seriously. It must develop its own initiatives to contain and end the conflicts on the fringes of our Union, in both east and south. The diplomatic initiative launched by the Federal Chancellor and Foreign Minister Maas to push Europe's interest in stabilisation in Libya – together with and in support of the United Nations, naturally – is, in my view, a really good example here. The Sahel region in northern Africa requires just as much

attention. As – obviously – does the explosive situation around Iran in the Middle East, which affects Europe directly. Let me say this: I believe terminating the JCPOA was a mistake. The Middle East has become an even more dangerous, definitely not a safer, place. However, we have to deal with the new realities. And the new realities tell me that it remains the Europeans' task to introduce new initiatives and courses of action to help prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and to ward off a nuclear arms race throughout the region. As these few examples show, there is no shortage of huge challenges facing European foreign and security policy.

But we Germans must also answer the question of how we are going to talk seriously and in a spirit of confidence with France, our closest partner, about the European security issues President Macron mentioned in his important speech at the École de Guerre in Paris a week ago. We should take up his invitation to engage in dialogue. However, that also means seeing things from France's perspective and making our own contribution towards developing a joint strategic culture, without which Europe will not really work as a security-policy actor.

We Germans must measure ourselves by whether we are able not only to withstand the tension between Germany's growing responsibility and our realisation of our own limitations, but to use it for the benefit of Europe. It is not a matter of either or, of intervening or standing back. And it is certainly not a matter of engaging in courtesies with others. Rather, and this is a point I am really very serious about, it is a question of our own well considered interests. From these derives the responsibility – putting it bluntly – not just to state everything we cannot do, with reference to the historical roots of our restrictive export policy on the one hand and parliamentary army on the other. Instead, we must state more clearly where and what we can contribute to strengthening the European pillar in security policy. Then, and only then, will our limitations be understood.

Are we really serious about Europe? Then there must be no timid heart beating at the centre of Europe. Then we need the courage to keep on re examining the substance of our responsibility, not least in the light of the times.

A few thoughts in conclusion. I know from many conversations I have had across the country that there is a fundamental, widespread need for simplicity and certainty. Given the state of the world today, this is a promise no one who engages in honest and open analysis, no one who is aware of what is happening before our eyes, can in fact make. The world is, rather, becoming even more ambiguous, even more complex, even more contradictory.

And I know this does not make everything easier. I know that many people, at least in Germany, are already worried that the word

“responsibility” is being used to hide, first and foremost, military missions abroad. This assumption is wrong. In today’s world, responsibility means, above all, facing up to reality, not becoming fatalistic, and continuing to look for practical ways in which to change and improve the world. We just have to be clear, it needs to be clear to us in Germany, that we will not succeed in this from a position of weakness. Germany, however, can only gain its strength from a shared community with others. That, and only that, is why we must contribute more towards this strength.

So let us not be driven by fear and anxiety. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the US President under whom America freed Europe, said this: “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”. This is true with an eye to the future of our democracy here at home. And it is true of our role in Europe and the world. Again and again, an open view of the world reveals developments that are astonishing and encouraging: progress in the fight against poverty, hunger and child mortality; countries undergoing transformation, such as Ethiopia; societies that are opening up, having been shut off for so long, like the Sudan or Uzbekistan; millions of people in many countries of the world calling for recognition and dignity, participation and opportunities to develop their personalities.

Meeting this primeval human need is the normative project the West once set itself. Europe, and, I believe, Germany in particular, would do well to take a less missionary approach to the world. Our political agenda cannot be to westernise the world. However, we cannot and must not abandon the normative project of creating a world which makes the dignity of the individual – one of the overarching goals laid down 75 years ago in the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, alongside peace and security, putting the strength of the law before the law of the strong – the standard for state action. This is the open project that persists, without geographical borders, without skin colour. If we ourselves keep it alive, if we again breathe life into our ideas and institutions, then it will have an impact far beyond our own borders and be able once again to set an example. It will build trust and develop new power. Self confidently, not with a sense of mission. It is our task, for our country, to make a contribution. And we will do so. With realism and curiosity, with drive, courage and confidence.

Thank you very much. I wish you a successful conference.