



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
Speech in the General Debate at the 76th session  
of the United Nations General Assembly  
in New York  
on 24 September 2021**

As we meet here in this venerable forum, the final rallies of a long election campaign are being held in Germany. The day after tomorrow, 60 million Germans are called upon to elect a new parliament. They will decide on new coalitions and on the successor of a Federal Chancellor who has governed Germany for 16 years.

Distinguished colleagues, at this time of political transition in my country, I would like to assure you: also after this election, Germany remains a country that is aware of its international responsibility and shoulders it.

There are two compelling reasons for this. Firstly, we Germans do not forget: the political and economic rebirth after two World Wars, our journey to re-enter the international community after all the horrors for which my country had been responsible and finally our peaceful reunification – this Germany's path of fortune was only possible with the support of our neighbours and partners! And, secondly, we are convinced that the path to a more peaceful future, the resolution of the major issues facing humanity, is going to require much, much more cooperation within the international community.

The Preamble of Germany's Basic Law formulates our aspiration in brief but precise terms: "to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe". This aspiration, this obligation, is one shared by every German Government. And that is why it was important for me to come to New York today as Federal President and convey this Germany's message to the international community: our partners can rely on us and our competitors need to keep reckoning with us.

To my mind, foreign policy responsibility begins with a frank and undistorted look at the world. Over the last few days, the speakers at this General Assembly have been unusually open in their endeavours

here. And indeed, the global situation today is – in every respect – sobering.

The fall of Kabul marks a turning point. We achieved our goal of defeating those who wrought horrendous terror on this city twenty years ago. But despite immense endeavour and investment, we were not able in two decades to establish a self-sustaining political order in Afghanistan.

My country also shares responsibility. And we have an ongoing responsibility, particularly towards the many Afghans who had hoped for a more peaceful, free and democratic future.

Yet I believe we need to ask ourselves: what conclusion do we draw from this failure? What lessons can we learn, what tasks do we feel able to perform having had to acknowledge that we wanted too much?

I am convinced that resignation would be the wrong lesson to draw. To my mind, this moment of geopolitical disenchantment contains three messages for foreign policy: we need to become more honest, smarter but also stronger!

Firstly, we need to be honest when considering our options and our limits. We need to be more realistic in defining and prioritising our aims and interests. We can often achieve more when we want less.

Secondly, we need to be smarter in selecting our instruments and setting our priorities. German and European foreign policy must not restrict itself to being right and condemning others. What we need to do is extend our toolbox – diplomatic, military, civilian, humanitarian. And for me, being smart in turn means: less sense of mission and more openness in our endeavour to find potential solutions and common ground – also with those who are different from us.

And thirdly, even though some may find this paradoxical: we need to get stronger when it comes to our means. In all our countries, the citizens expect their governments to protect them from threat and attack. And rightly so! That is why in these unstable times, my country, too, is investing more in its defence capability. However, it is clear as well that future generations will not judge us on our military strength today but on whether we were able to resolve problems and conflicts. Military strength without the will to forge understanding, without the courage to engage in diplomacy, does not make the world more peaceful. We need strength at the negotiating table just as we need strength in defence. That is also why Germany shouldered responsibility over the last two years in the United Nations Security Council – and we would like to do so again in 2027/28.

Yes, we failed on many things in Afghanistan. But our failure should not be cause for schadenfreude for others. I am deliberately using this German word that has made its way into many languages: schadenfreude. A mind-set in which loss to one is gain to another fails

to do justice to the reality of our interconnected world. Regional instability, weakening state structures, refugee and migrant flows, religious extremism and terrorism, and new forms of conflict – whether hybrid or digital, environmental or resource-based. Such developments threaten us all and we all have to deal with them. Small and large alike.

The major powers – the United States, China and Russia – shoulder a particular responsibility here, a particular responsibility for smaller countries as well. The privileges the major powers enjoy in the United Nations system are only justified provided that they promote and uphold the international peaceful order in the interest of all – and do not ignore or undermine it in pursuit of their own interests. The United Nations is not a boxing ring devoid of values at the disposal of the world powers.

However, I do know that the hand pointing the finger at others has other fingers pointing back at ourselves. Those warning now, for example, about an American withdrawal from the world must not succumb to similar reflexes at home. We Europeans, also we Germans, have to do more for our own security, do more for peace and stability in our neighbourhood and around the world. We need to continue our multilateral efforts: in Libya, in eastern Ukraine, in the Middle East. We are ready to renew the nuclear agreement and we call upon Iran to return to serious and earnest negotiations as quickly as possible.

I know we are in agreement with our closest partner France in saying: we need a strong common foreign and security policy in Europe. Only a strong Europe can expect others to play their part in the international peaceful order. Only a strong Europe can do both at the same time: seek cooperation with China where cooperation is in the interest of both sides or indeed necessary – and at the same time demand China respects human rights and international law, as well as the legitimate interests of its neighbours.

A strong, rules-based peaceful order also needs a strong transatlantic partnership. We know that the United States is setting new and different priorities. And we know that as the world changes, alliances in turn need to adapt. But no short-term advantage is worth causing cracks to appear in our transatlantic unity. We need to be mindful of this together.

The responsibility of the major powers, including us Europeans, weighs all the heavier when we call to mind the global challenges, the major issues facing humanity.

Never before have we had such an existential experience of our interdependence, our reliance on one another, as we have had in the almost two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, although we do know that the pandemic is only over when it is over everywhere: when we take stock of global vaccine distribution the picture is at best mixed.

Too many people are still waiting for the life-saving vaccine. That is why distribution must not be an instrument for countries to showcase themselves or grant tactical favours. On the contrary, the COVAX initiative under the auspices of the United Nations is the right way forward together. One in three COVAX vaccine doses is being made available by Europe and, as the world's second-largest donor having pledged two billion dollars, my country will contribute at least another hundred million additional doses by the end of the year.

What holds true for the existential threat posed by the pandemic is just as true when it comes to climate change. Apocalyptic fires and scorching temperatures, tropical storms and hurricanes, failed harvests, drought and famine: they are happening now and they are happening here. They pose a threat to people, families, livelihoods – everywhere, particularly to the most vulnerable but to rich industrialised countries as well. The devastating floods in western Germany this summer cost almost 200 of my compatriots their lives. And we also recall the recent images from here, from New York City: huge masses of water in streets, apartments, subways.

Against this dramatic backdrop, the regression to the national egoisms I warn against is more than a mere step back to the past. It is robbing us of our shared future! It is harming the very institutions and instruments that we now need. At this time, we need to make strong decisions together in Glasgow!

After all, when it comes to climate change, the gap between our ambitious goals and our concrete policies remains much too wide. It is our job to close this gap together. And we have to close it now! After all, we are living in an era in which humankind can irreversibly destroy the living conditions on our planet. It is up to us, to our generation, to leave the future open for our children and grandchildren! We have to leave a future open in which climate protection and economic prosperity, a future in which a self-determined life in freedom and social cohesion, are possible simultaneously. This is – and I am not using this lofty word lightly – this is our key historic task! We must not fail – the future of humanity is at stake!

I began my speech with democracy, with the democratic transition unfolding in my own country. As I draw to a close, I would like to widen the angle once more and consider the situation of liberal democracy as a whole – its credibility, its impact, its future at this difficult geopolitical juncture.

In Afghanistan, a long engagement which cost many lives has failed. But not the idea behind it!

My country has a deep-set commitment to the idea of freedom and democracy – perhaps precisely because our German path to get there was long.

We do of course know that political systems are in reality never perfect. Not in Europe, not in America, not anywhere. Consequently, they can neither be exported, nor, taking it further, imposed. I believe the task to be performed is a different one: it is not by missionary zeal but by letting the strength of democracy shine through at home, by bringing democracy to bear in the daily lives of our citizens and by resisting the temptation of authoritarianism that we render the best service to this tremendous idea.

Here in the General Assembly, US President Biden spoke of the global power of democracy. I would like to underscore: democracy is not directed against anyone. It is not a Western instrument of political power. It is an open project! Regardless of compass reading, regardless of geographical borders, regardless of skin colour. It is the project for freedom, the project for human dignity that the countries of the world set as their yardstick in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

And because this must remain our yardstick, withdrawal from the world is not an option for us Germans – even after the failure in Afghanistan. While people are being robbed of their dignity, indifference is not an option!

That is why more realism in foreign policy does not mean: less responsibility and less ambition to make the world a better place.

On the contrary, the inherent human yearning for freedom and dignity and self-determination will never be extinguished anywhere. Doing justice to this human yearning instead of suppressing it – that is the real question defining our future in the 21st century. And this question will not be decided on any battlefield in our world.

After all, the firepower of the most powerful army comes to an end. The long arm of the strongest state comes to an end.

But the appeal of freedom and democracy in the hearts and minds of people lives on! That is my firm belief.