

Taking a Stand

Germany's security and defence policy in public debate



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The debate on Germany's security and defence policy has entered a new phase. Over the past five years, people have become convinced that the international security situation is less stable than in the past; that old certainties are coming undone, and that Germany must react.

Our national economic success, our social cohesion, and our freedom are becoming more and more dependent on conditions determined by international affairs. More precisely, our security, as well as our way of life, are dependent on the

liberal rules-based order prevailing over a mind-set focused on spheres of influence and authoritarian hierarchies. We want and need an order that facilitates and rewards cooperation rather than confrontation.

The developments which are weakening this order are well-known: Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea as well as its continued aggression in eastern Ukraine; the spread of the so-called Islamic State and its terrorist attacks, also in Europe; the "arc of crisis" stretching from Africa to the Middle East to Afghanistan, which has greatly contributed to the refugee crisis; and, on a global scale, the intensifying competition between great powers; the successes of authoritarian politics that are challenging our liberal social and political order; and the impact of climate change.

It is incumbent upon those of us who carry responsibility in Germany to take a stand and develop new ideas. To this end, Germany's security policy can draw on a proven system of coordinates, the pillars of which include European cohesion, the transatlantic alliance, and a responsible use of military force – always embedded in a broad political approach.

Germany has acted in accordance with these pillars. Our country has assumed a leading role in NATO in securing the borders of the alliance. Germany continues to be a driving force in the

International responsibility: Should Germany become more strongly involved in international crises?



creation of the European Defence Union, which aims for more efficient and effective cooperation among the armed forces of EU member states. And the Bundeswehr has shouldered missions in countries such as Mali and Iraq, where we are training local security forces and strengthening bulwarks against terrorism.

A majority of Germans has supported these policies. Wherever required, prudent persuasion – the key task of democratic political leadership – made it possible for Berlin to make and implement the necessary decisions.

Regardless, there is an increasing number of voices suggesting that Germany's momentum is waning or may have vanished entirely – while our challenges are increasing. Many doubt whether Germany is doing enough. And whether we are at all capable of mustering additional strength. Others fear that our approach – the pillars of German security policy – is no longer up-to-date. They fear that the United States is no longer as reliable as it once was and that cohesion in Europe is eroding, necessitating a new way of thinking.

I would like to see a broad public debate on these issues and I am grateful to Körber-Stiftung for creating the Berlin Forum to serve as a key platform in this regard.

I am certain that we are already doing what is necessary to strengthen security in Germany and

Europe. We are moving in the right direction, but we will need to increase our speed, quality, and intensity in terms of both our strategic debate and concrete measures. I will make every effort to achieve this and in doing so will be guided by three ideas.

First: We Germans need to better internalize the fact that we have to deal with issues of international stability. Hence, we should have a more open and rigorous discussion on the aims and means of German security policy. Only by clearly articulating our interests can we provide orientation and room for common solutions. And our overarching interest in foreign and security policy is to strengthen and further develop the liberal rules-based order.

That may sound abstract, but it constitutes the guiding principle for all the concrete issues we face in international politics. No matter what individual case we are dealing with, our response will always aim to strengthen the principles of the existing political order. In order to demonstrate what it is that we stand for, we will need to point to this underlying idea, again and again.

Second: We need to increase our capacity to act in international security affairs. Germany has a wealth of instruments at its disposal to work toward a world that is peaceful, prosperous, and free. This is true above all in cooperation with our partners in the EU and our allies in NATO. But Germany's

instruments must be in good condition and up to date in order to be effective.

For the Bundeswehr this has not been fully achieved yet, despite the turn-around of recent years. Some things simply need time – such as the development and procurement of major armaments – but we must get the basics right, and this will require reliable funding.

For this reason, the two percent commitment remains the right approach. We must seriously move toward a defence budget of this scale – in the interest of our security, but also because Germany has every reason to be proud that it shoulders its fair share of the burden in international institutions. That must remain the case, especially as two cents taken from every euro earned is not too great an investment in the state’s primary task – to guarantee the security of its citizens from external threats.

Third: We must spell out our policies in more concrete terms and, in doing so, tolerate ambivalence. Germans’ fondness for fundamental principles is valuable; it is a clear indication of the values we share, and the overarching ideas we pursue. However, sometimes it obscures the existence of a feasible, pragmatic solution in coopera-

tion with our partners. For example, European security cooperation is an invaluable asset and is making real progress thanks to the PESCO projects and other innovations, such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). But we must invest even more energy to ensure that these measures yield tangible benefits.

This also means responding more resolutely to sudden crises: thinking in terms of possible courses of action, suggesting solutions, and not always waiting until asked. And accepting that a common European security policy also demands difficult trade-offs and compromises of us Germans – for example, with respect to weapons exports, participation in military missions, and the way we deal with uncomfortable allies and powerful political challengers such as China. These considerations are only possible if they are truly understood as strategic issues and not simply as an opportunity for the next tweet.

Promoting this strategic culture is a pressing task for us all. Let us address them together – within the scope of the Berlin Foreign Policy Forum and beyond.

