IPS

INTERVIEWS 20.04.2026

‘Europe must be the guardian of the rules-based international order’

Adis Ahmetovic, foreign affairs spokesperson for the SPD parliamentary group, on dealing with current conflicts and Germany’s role in Europe

Given the current global situation – from Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine to conflicts in the Middle East – there is growing debate about whether Europe must become more autonomous in security policy. How should European security policy be rethought so that the EU can respond quickly and cohesively? What role should Germany play in this?

> The European Union was founded as a peace project — not as a military alliance. But reality has changed. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 at the latest, it has become clear that security in Europe must be organised more swiftly, more decisively and above all more European. That means we need greater military capability — coordinated at the European level.
>
> Pressure has increased further as we are witnessing a profound shift in the global balance of power: the era of a stable, rules-based order led by the United States is coming to an end. We are increasingly moving into a world in which power politics once again dominates. Precisely for this reason, Europe must become more sovereign — especially vis-à-vis so-called great powers. Political developments in the United States show how uncertain dependencies can be. The United States under President Donald Trump is not a reliable anchor for security policy. Therefore, we need an independently capable security architecture — as a strong European pillar within NATO.
>
> And thus, we committed ourselves to significantly higher defence investments and are aligning with the five per cent target within NATO. This is not an end in itself, but an expression of political seriousness. Anyone who wants security must also underpin it materially.

Many are calling for Germany to take on a clear leadership role.

This expectation is justified. As Europe's largest economy, Germany has a key role to play — and because today we are seen as a reliable partner, rather than a risk. This creates responsibility. But for us, leadership does not mean dominance; it means inclusion. German security policy is always European security policy. Our interests are European.

And we must be honest with ourselves: military strength alone will not protect us. Without economic stability, secure energy supply and diplomacy, there can be no sustainable security. In a world of increasing power competition, it is the combination of military capability, economic strength and political capacity to act that is decisive.

How should the EU deal with partners who block decisions, as Hungary recently did regarding the aid package for Ukraine? And how can this be reconciled with partners outside the EU who are not always cooperative?

On fundamental issues, Europe must not allow itself to be blocked or blackmailed. When it comes to war and peace, the EU must be capable of action. This means more majority voting and clearer mechanisms against obstruction. Those who endanger Europe's security must not be allowed to dictate the pace. At the same time, Europe must present a united front externally. In a world where the law of the strongest is regaining importance, unity is our most important political currency.

How should the EU act within the international order in a multipolar world with new conflicts?

Europe must move from being an object to becoming an actor. In a world of growing power competition, it is no longer enough to react — we must shape developments. We are witnessing a shift toward a world in which the self-defined morality of individual presidents is placed above the law. This is highly dangerous for Europe. Our stability is not based on military dominance, but on rules, treaties and reliability.

That is why it is crucial for us: Europe must be the guardian of the rules-based international order. This is not an idealistic project, but a matter of tangible self-interest. Without international law and binding rules, Europe – situated between great powers – becomes vulnerable.

At the same time, we must be credible. This also means avoiding double standards. Anyone defending Ukraine's territorial integrity must not relativize these principles elsewhere. Only in this way can we

build trust — including in the Global South. This is precisely where a central task lies: we must deepen partnerships beyond our close allies in the traditional West. Many states want rules — but without interference in their internal affairs. We must find answers to this if we want to forge coalitions in a multipolar world.

Other social democratic actors in Europe, such as Pedro Sánchez, are currently taking clear positions on conflicts in the Middle East, for example regarding Iran. How should other European social democrats, such as Germany's SPD, position themselves?

I have made no secret of my assessment of the war against Iran as it is currently being conducted: it is illegal. As a social democrat, I must state this plainly. The SPD is the party of international law. Especially in a world where the rules-based order is under pressure, this foundation must not be relativized. This is not a moral platitude, but a strategic interest — particularly for Germany. Our security depends on rules being upheld, not arbitrariness.

Of course, we also know that we constantly operate in a tension between interests and values. But our orientation includes multilateralism and international law. In the tradition of Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt, we combine adherence to principles with strategic realism. Diplomacy is not the opposite of strength — it is its prerequisite.

Ulrike Herrmann said at the Leipzig Book Fair that we are in the Third World War. What is your assessment?

No, we are not. But we are experiencing a phase of significant global tensions with real risks of escalation. We see multiple conflict zones simultaneously — in Europe, the Middle East and rising tensions in East Asia. This simultaneity makes the situation dangerous.

At the same time, this problem also presents an opportunity: there is often a lack of concrete political plans for the present, as well as strategies for what comes next. Military measures alone – as we can clearly observe – do not create sustainable stability. This opens up an opportunity for us to develop new capacity for shaping outcomes through more diplomacy, foresight, stronger international coordination and a clear commitment to international law.

The prerequisite remains, as mentioned at the outset: Europe must act in unity — also in dialogue with partners beyond the West. Security does not arise from conventional and nuclear deterrence alone, but from the combination of strength, diplomacy and reliable rules. The majority of states worldwide ultimately pursue these same goals.

This interview was conducted by Valentina Berndt.



Adis Ahmetovic
Berlin

Adis Ahmetovic is a German politician and has been a member of the German Bundestag since 2021. He has been the foreign policy spokesperson for the SPD parliamentary group in the Bundestag since 2025. Ahmetovic studied political science, German studies, language and literature.

-