INTERVIEWS 21.02.2019

'We should not take friendships for granted'

Minister of State Niels Annen talks about the threat to rules-based multilateralism and Germany's role in the world

Read this interview in German.

Mr Annen, the Munich Security Conference has become one of the world's most important security policy conferences in recent years. Is it mere coincidence that this conference is held in Germany, of all places?

For everyone in Germany who deals with foreign and security policy, this is certainly a unique opportunity for dialogue. The sheer number of events and, above all, the participants involved mean it almost resembles a miniature meeting of the UN General Assembly. It is *the* place where things happen – often in chance encounters in corridors and the rooms where bilateral discussions take place. But many debates have also been initiated in the plenary session, the public part of the conference. Like this year's speech by the German Chancellor. And the Conference itself is the source of debate, too – after all, the history of the event is far from undisputed...

You mean its origins as a military science conference.

Exactly, that was how it began. While the focus remains on security policy, the range of topics has broadened in recent years. Today, for example, we also discuss questions of civil conflict prevention as well as climate change and security. This has become part of the Conference, and I fully support this development.

For me, this is also characteristic of German foreign policy: not concentrating on one single aspect, but emphasising the entire spectrum. Of course, this also provokes criticism. Demonstrations take place every now and again. I remember one occasion, back when I was still a young member of parliament: I talked to opponents of the

conference with the then newly appointed Chairman, Ambassador Ischinger. It ended with us having water tipped over us, and we had to leave the hall through the backdoor. But that's all part and parcel of a lively debate (laughs).

The title of this year's event was 'Who will pick up the pieces of the broken world order?' Even with all the challenges facing us, is that not rather over-dramatic?

I certainly hope it will not come to that. But the world order from which we have benefited so greatly, which has agreed on shared rules and values, is under massive pressure. This is affecting countries like Germany, which has firmly believed in the value of cooperation in recent years and could hold back on matters of hard security – precisely because we have been member of an alliance. This can no longer be taken for granted.

This is why I feel the debate we had at the Conference is crucial: what can we ourselves do to allow us to continue our rules-based approach to life and the economy. There's no need to paint everything black, but the problems we are facing are serious. The wars on our doorstep and the threat of trade conflicts directly affect German interests. We cannot afford to close our eyes.

One answer from the German government, and the Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in particular, is an alliance of multilateralists. At the conference, there was a feeling that the second row of international powers is stepping up. Could these powers be the ones to keep the order together as the superpowers pull away?

I see Canada as a good example of what Heiko Maas described. Our political approach has to involve taking greater care of our friends. We should not take these friendships for granted. We need to pursue concrete cooperation in order to help ensure the voice of the multilateralists is heard and amplified. This also means robustly defending our own interests, like we have to do right now with the Iran deal – unfortunately, I have to say.

We must also defend the values for which we stand when it comes to concrete cases. For example, Germany recently supported the Canadian position in the dramatic conflict with China over the detention of two Canadian citizens. We need to embody this spirit. This is why we are working with many partners – or, to use diplomat slang, like-minded players – to make this cooperation even stronger.

Detractors might say that this is a lovely ambition, but Germany is not capable of achieving this and reaching a true reconciliation of interests

even on its own doorstep.

There will always be criticism. And those who want to mock should be allowed to do so. I'm happy that we are talking more about foreign policy, as this will really bring us forward. Germany is not a superpower, nor does it wish to be. However, we play an important political and economic role. And we're in the process of strengthening our defence capabilities. Of course, there are differences of opinion about this in parliament and among the general public. But I think it's important for us not to focus solely on the negative aspects.

After all, Germany is not a powerless player, or just looking on from the sidelines. We are a key partner for many countries thanks to the reputation our country has earned in the world over many years, our economic strength and our democratic, highly transparent politics. Although we are not neutral, we are in a position to mediate between warring factions in many conflicts. We do not always talk publicly about what goes on behind the scenes. But German foreign policy plays an important role. The problem is that calls for greater involvement are sometimes equated with imitating American, Russian or other power politics. That's not something we can attempt to do, nor would it work.

In other words, are we too self-critical sometimes?

We often hear that Germany does nothing. Germany does too little. Germany is not a real player. When I look at the topics I deal with every day, in which Germany plays a very concrete role, I don't find that very persuasive. We are now one of the leading global lights when it comes to humanitarian aid. The same is true for stabilisation, and we are becoming increasingly active in mediation, too. Germany played a central role in negotiating the Minsk agreement on Ukraine. We should not to hide our own achievements.

This is the important role that states can play in securing the international order. What function can or should be performed by non-governmental players?

A very important one, I'd say. We have seen how a non-government organisation, ICAN, succeeded in initiating an international treaty. That's something remarkable. Although we may disagree about the choice of means, there's no doubt that this was an exceptional success for an initiative that was also recognised with the Nobel Peace Prize. It's good that this has raised an extremely important topic to the global agenda, namely nuclear disarmament.

In our stabilisation efforts at the Foreign Office, we have created a

new department to work in partnership with a number of non-governmental organisations whose commitment and expertise can help us implement our policies on the ground. Civil society is and remains our constant advisor and dialogue partner. This naturally also applies to the political foundations with their own particular access to many players in almost all parts of the world. Anyone who believes the rules-based order can be stabilised through government policy alone will quickly discover the limits of their own power.

This interview was conducted by Michael Bröning.



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