Speech by the
Federal Minister of Defense,
Dr. Ursula von der Leyen,
on the Occasion of
the 50th Munich Security Conference

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Check against delivery!
Ladies and gentlemen!

This anniversary conference is a reason for joy as it is proof of the success of this unique forum. It is, however, not only a reason for joy, but it also gives us reason to pause for a moment as this is the first Munich Security Conference without Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist.

Kleist has created something unique and innovative with this conference that is still vivid and relevant today, half a century later. He was and still is a role model for us in Germany. Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist had not only been a member of the German resistance (movement) against the Nazi regime.

He also drew an essential lesson from Germany’s history in the last century: The North-American and European nations needed to become partners and friends to work together for peace, for democracy and liberty. This was his essential motive for bringing this conference into being.

Our times are very different. Europe is peaceful and stable and most European countries share great parts of their sovereignty in the European Union. But: peace, freedom, security and justice are not a given. All the more, we as Germans remain strongly committed to the United Nations, our transatlantic bond and the European Union.
Ladies and Gentlemen!

For NATO and its partners, the ISAF mission and its transition to Resolute Support remains the most demanding task. Lasting for more than a decade and notwithstanding the manifold military and political challenges and also the pain it brought about, this mission has also triggered a significant push for modernization in the Alliance, both in political and military terms.

When I first visited our servicemen and -women in Afghanistan right before Christmas, I was deeply impressed by the level and the density of cooperation among ISAF countries. I experienced how 16 nations – NATO Allies, and non-NATO countries, soldiers from Europe, America and Asia, – were effectively operating under one command in the North of Afghanistan. With Germany as the framework nation and major force enabler our partners provided infantry for force protection, close air support and air transport and many more specialized capabilities.

Others are engaged with the Afghan Security Forces in “train, assist and advice” functions or serve in medical units to save the lives of their fellow soldiers. I witnessed how our armed forces are operating in a smart way by pooling and sharing their capabilities and resources and by connecting their forces. With many of these nations in Regional Command North we already reached an understanding that our cooperation should continue beyond ISAF on Mission Resolute Support.

In this context, Germany is ready to remain engaged in the north of the country as a lead nation to support Afghanistan on its own path towards stability and peace. However, President Karzai has to enter into the necessary agreements. The ball is now in his court.
Ladies and Gentlemen!

Multinational cooperation in its best way is not confined to Afghanistan. It has, for example, already been a success in our Balkan missions for almost 20 years and it is also common practice on our ships operating off the Horn of Africa. If this is teaching us day-by-day that trust, effectiveness and pragmatic solutions are possible in our missions abroad, why shouldn’t it be possible to adopt these patterns for the strategic or political level? Why shouldn’t we look through the same prism when we do our force planning and when we decide about the structures and capabilities of our armed forces? I know this idea itself is not original – but as the financial crisis and our demography have forced many of our nations to start major defence reforms, I have got the impression that we already lost time by looking too much at our national courtyards instead of focusing on the whole set of European forces. If we Europeans want to remain a credible actor in security policy, we must plan and act together. European nations ought to be prepared to take over a fair share of the transatlantic burden – in a combined, consensual and efficient manner. With this in mind, my predecessor, Thomas de Maizière, launched a new initiative the so-called Framework Nations Concept. It is a European answer to a European problem. It focuses on groups of nations, bigger and smaller ones, coming together voluntarily to work for the joint development of sets of forces and capabilities as well as for collective training and exercise. Creating such grouping will be facilitated by a Framework Nation. I believe this approach has the potential to strengthen both NATO and the EU. It also helps to improve the burden sharing imbalance, both with the US and within Europe. Germany is ready to contribute to this endeavour as a Framework Nation or as a contributing nation. And I am determined, together with likeminded
Allies and partners, to take the implementation of the concept forward in the coming weeks and months.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

In the meantime, the world will not wait for the implementation of initiatives, however successful they might prove in the future. This audience does not need to look at the program of this conference, to become aware of the current crises and conflicts we are facing today: the appalling war in Syria; the still gloomy situation in Libya; the deteriorating situation in some parts of our neighboring continent Africa. And I am fully aware: this enumeration is in no way exhaustive. On this stage, the repercussions of globalization have been discussed in depth during the last years. It is obvious: These crises and conflicts, they affect us in a very direct manner. These crises and conflicts affect those who feel any responsibility for international stability. And these crises and conflicts affect our humanitarian conscience not to let those down who suffer most.

Therefore, to sit and wait is not an option. If we have means, if we have capabilities - we have the obligation and we have the responsibility to engage.

To avoid any misunderstanding: This does not mean that we should be inclined to make use of the whole spectrum of our military inventory – not under any circumstances. And it does not mean that we will find satisfactory outcomes within a short time frame.
But it does mean that we have the obligation and the responsibility to contribute to at least modest progress towards a possible solution of the current crises and conflicts. Indifference never is an option – neither from a security perspective nor from a humanitarian perspective. And Ladies and Gentlemen, Indifference is not an option for Germany. As a major economy and a country of significant size we have a strong interest in international peace and stability. Given these facts the Federal Government is prepared to enhance our international responsibility. Therefore, we are willing to support the destruction of the residual quantities of chemical warfare agents from Syria. Therefore, we are willing to reinforce our contribution to the efforts in Mali. Therefore we are willing to support the upcoming mission of the European Union in the Central African Republic, if indicated and needed.

Nevertheless, long-term stability will only be achieved by rebuilding functioning government structures. The most successful strategy is capacity and institution building. Neither NATO nor the EU – let alone individual nations – can sustainably solve crises such as those in Africa. It is therefore crucial to enable reliable partners on the ground – be it regional organizations or states – to provide for their own security. This must be done in a comprehensive way through training, advice, assistance and if necessary also equipment aid. To this noble end, the European nations need to learn to speak with one voice. I will take a stand for further improving the cooperation between EU and NATO.

Ladies and gentlemen!

Germany is strong in Europe, but above all Germany is strong because of Europe and NATO. We will never forget this. Indifference is not an option for Germany. We will always honour this legacy. It is also the legacy of Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist.