



Bundesministerium
der Verteidigung

“Defending the West”

Speech by

**Federal Minister of Defence
Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer**

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Check against delivery!

Defending the West – that is the leitmotif this afternoon.

It is the common thread that runs through the entire conference.

And it is a sign of the times. Time and again, we hear variations on this theme: The West is under pressure from within and without, the West is weak when it comes to global governance, “Westlessness” has set in.

As an observation, this is correct. However, it is not enough simply to observe this – especially not for those who consider themselves part of the West.

After all, the West goes far beyond Europe, North America, the EU or NATO. The West encompasses nations in all parts of the world; the West is more than a direction on a map.

The West is an idea.

The idea of free society, of human rights, the rule of law and the separation of powers. The idea of a fair international order that favours freedom – and is based on international law.

This idea is being challenged today, not only in ideological terms, not only on paper or in dramatic speeches. It is being challenged in very specific and concrete terms.

We have seen this in the unlawful annexation of Crimea and we see it in Islamist terrorism. We see it in the war in Syria and in the proliferation of nuclear weapons. We see it in illegitimate territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific region.

The enemies of this Western idea have the power to act, the will to act – and are willing to use military force. The enemies of the Western idea are creating new realities – brutally and ruthlessly.

And what is the West doing? What are we doing?

We are dwelling on our weaknesses. We comment on the actions of others. We complain.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is not our task as Europeans. In this I fully agree with Emmanuel Macron: We should not just dwell on our weaknesses and criticise the actions of others – we should have more strategic dialogue in Europe. And most of all, we should not just talk, but should take concrete action together to improve our security.

I firmly believe that we can preserve and consolidate the liberal international order, and the West. We can enhance our ability to act together. We can increase our will to act.

I think that Europe and especially my country have a duty to become more able and more willing to act. Because we Germans and Europeans are faced with a strategic situation that is increasingly dominated by great power competition.

This holds true especially for the relationship between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. A complicated relationship of mutual dependence, with underlying ideological differences, with conflicting ideas on what constitutes a successful social and international order.

We Germans and Europeans know that these differences also concern us.

We are not neutral. We are not “somewhere in the middle”. We are and will continue to be part of the West.

Because we are firmly on the side of freedom and the rule of law, of democracy and the separation of powers. We stand by multilateralism, free and fair trade, and open societies.

To achieve this, we Germans and Europeans must carry more weight in international politics, and we are willing and able to do so. After all, fairness is important in politics even among friends – especially when it comes to burden sharing.

We Germans and Europeans are already doing much for our own security, for international crisis management and conflict prevention.

But we are still not doing enough.

I want German and European security and defence policy to be more effective. I want our actions to be better coordinated internationally, and I want them to be more visible.

I want us to be able to follow our own interests, and to stay on course, even when the going gets tough.

I say this not only with an eye to the competition between America and China. Or to the question of how to deal with Russia, which is pressuring European nations by launching hybrid attacks and disregarding their territorial sovereignty – from Ukraine to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the United Kingdom and to us here in Germany. I say this with an eye to Europe's southern neighbourhood as well – to Africa and the Middle East.

Ladies and gentlemen,
there is no lack of astute analyses and urgent declarations of intent.

I remember the Security Conference six years ago, when Germany declared to “assume more responsibility” and the then Federal President Gauck demanded that Germany make “earlier, more decisive and more substantial” contributions to international crisis management.

The same still applies today.

Germany is a committed and reliable partner – in the VJTF, as part of Enhanced Forward Presence, in Mali and Iraq, and as the second largest troop contributor in Afghanistan.

Only yesterday, my American colleague Mark Esper and I, with many other nations of the OIR core group, decided to continue the fight against the terrorism of ISIS.

Germany also remains committed to nuclear participation within NATO. We view this nuclear umbrella as an essential part of European security.

Nevertheless, we have not yet entirely fulfilled the promise of 2014.

In my view, the Munich consensus of words must become a Munich consensus of action.

This is the goal of the initiatives that I have launched as Minister of Defence.

We are enhancing the operational readiness of the Bundeswehr with a “readiness initiative”, which will considerably improve our equipment and combat power before the end of this year.

We are keeping our promise to our NATO Allies and increase defence spending year after year. In 2031 just as now, ten percent of all necessary capabilities of NATO are to be provided by Germany. For this we need a defence budget that amounts to two percent of our GDP.

I am also glad that as part of the E3 format, we are continuing talks with President Erdogan about the situation of the people in northern Syria. The suffering of the Syrian population and the tangible strategic impact of this conflict clearly show the consequences of Europe’s inaction and failure to take a stand.

We must not fail like that in other conflict regions. I therefore think it is right that we in Germany and Europe should define our political aims with regard to the Sahel region, and I have insisted that we do so.

The Sahel is a key region for Europe – for example when it comes to migration or the threat of terrorism. This is why it is so important that Germany, too, should remain committed there – including militarily.

We do this in the form of training missions that help our African partners to protect themselves. We must further increase our robustness on these missions and take a critical look at whether we can do more for our common benefit.

I am also in favour of a common approach regarding the Strait of Hormuz. Germany is not participating in the US mission because we do not think that “maximum pressure” is the right way of dealing with Iran. But of course the stability of the region and global freedom of navigation are of highest priority for us.

I therefore think that we should for the first time make full use of the instruments provided to us by the Treaty on European Union and mandate individual Member States at a EU Summit to carry out a joint mission.

We have the common instruments and we have the common interest – let us finally form a common political will!

The E3 format comprising France, the United Kingdom and Germany is another example. It functions as an important “hinge” between NATO and the EU – which is why it should be flexible and inclusive. When it comes to the stabilisation of Libya, for example, I think we should include Italy in this format.

Most of all, however, E3 demonstrates that Britain can – and must – remain deeply involved in our indivisible European security, despite its regrettable departure from the European Union.

Ladies and gentlemen,

in order to increase Europe’s decisiveness and effectiveness, France and Germany are developing military platforms for the future – and we are always open to cooperating with others.

One example is the Future Combat Air System, which we are currently starting to implement – together with Spain. Only three days ago, we were able to approve funding for this project together with the Bundestag.

We are also making progress on the Main Ground Combat System – which could be considered a “battle tank for the future”. That is where we Europeans are showing that we are

serious about carrying more weight – militarily, technologically, and in terms of industrial policy.

This is to extend far beyond military aspects, which is why I would like to see more cooperation initiatives in the areas of artificial intelligence and quantum computing.

And I would like to see a common European approach to UAVs and air defence – particularly with our partners in Central and Eastern Europe, who quite rightly share a common threat perception. In the coming weeks, I would like to discuss this with our friends – in Paris, but also in Warsaw, in Budapest, in Prague and in Bratislava.

Because we all belong together, we all belong to the West that we want to strengthen – in every part of the world.

I said before that the West represents an idea.

In the light of the crises and disappointments of the past years, some people in the West have begun to doubt whether the Western idea is still something to be guided by.

I say to them: This idea has lost none of its attraction; people everywhere are fascinated by it.

People take to the streets in their countries to demand more freedom in the face of intimidation and oppression, showing us how powerful this Western idea still is. These people show us that the best way to defend the West is to give its ideas the room they need to flourish.

Ladies and gentlemen,

we are at the beginning of a new decade. And I ask: What kind of world would we like to see at the beginning of the next decade? And what must we do today in order to make that a reality in 2030?

A good guiding principle, I believe, is to strengthen our shared freedom through action. We should not just to pay lip service to the idea of the West, but bring it to life through our actions.

Let us work to achieve this together.

Thank you very much.