



Bundesministerium
der Verteidigung

**Speech by
Federal Minister of Defense**

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**on the occasion of the presentation
of the
Steuben Schurz Media Award**

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Check against delivery!

Dr. Beermann,

Mr. Schneider,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is always a joyful event to receive an award, but especially when the recognition comes from such a distinguished source.

The Steuben-Schurz Society is the oldest existing German-American Friendship forum. It has witnessed and suffered through the highs and lows of German history itself. For decades it has been at the forefront of transatlantic efforts as a mediator organization, in local communities, with students, at the very foundation of our countries' relations.

An award given from the depth of this experience is a special honor for me.

Receiving this award now is a great joy also because these are such unusual times.

For anyone who promotes friendship with America these days, in this emotionally charged and politically polarized transatlantic environment, can expect to be sharply and often sweepingly criticized.

I am therefore thankful for support or backing of any kind. And I am very pleased to be able to count General Steuben and the revolutionary Schurz among the advocates of my transatlantic cause from now on.

Let me therefore express my heartfelt thanks for this award and also for your exceptionally kind words, Mr. Schneider. This is the kind of backing that the transatlantic relationship deserves.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

America – the word inspires certain associations and feelings in all of us. It leaves nobody cold.

For me personally, it is the early experiences that were formative; Mr. Schneider also mentioned this. In my family, the word “America” was always spoken with gratitude and warmth – and this has not changed. This is a formative influence that I share with many Germans of the post-war generation.

For this generation, America is most of all synonymous with liberation and the Berlin Airlift, the Marshall Plan and the first man on the moon, with open spaces and individualism, innovation and economic power, and later with winning the Cold War.

But America also challenges us, with its untamed power, its many faces, its contradictions, and a modernity whose ambitions sometimes overwhelm us. From the McCarthy era to the 1968 protests to the Me Too movement – whatever affects America, affects us.

America has taught us our democracy.

While that was a gift, a not inconsiderable minority considered it an imposition, which frequently turned into anti-Americanism. How is it possible, some asked, not without arrogance, that Germany, the “epitome of civilization” had to relearn being civilized from this young, Anglo-Saxon nation?

Today, I must say, this imposition was very good for us. This constant friction with America is a good thing, a productive thing. This friction entails confrontation, discourse, and dispute – and perpetually questioning oneself. This is the essence of an open society.

Most of all, however, America has given us what we call '*Westbindung*'. And this is more than just a geographic location. Germany is firmly anchored in the family of democratic, open societies of the West.

Konrad Adenauer, closely working with America, led the Federal Republic towards the West, and Helmut Kohl, together with America, integrated a unified Germany even more closely into the West.

Westbindung, to me, is and remains a clear rejection of the historic temptation of equidistance. *Westbindung* anchors us firmly in NATO and the EU and ties us closely to Washington, Brussels, Paris and London. It clearly and rightly positions us against a romantic fixation on Russia – and also against an illiberal corporative state that rejects parties and parliaments.

Westbindung is the answer to the famous “German question”, the question of what Germany stands for. Germany is a firm part of the West, and this is the only answer that makes peace possible at the heart of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we may have to answer a new German question.

Today, the West as a system of values is at risk in its entirety. It has once more become essential for Germany to confirm its commitment to the West. So that Europe can keep the peace. So that Europe can defend Western culture, freedom, the rule of law, the international order based on binding rules for all, and open markets.

It is only with Germany's strong support that Europe will be able to return to this strength.

And again, it is essential for this development to take place in close partnership with the United States.

Only America and Europe together can keep the West strong, defending it against the unmistakable Russian thirst for power and Chinese ambitions for global supremacy.

I am therefore firmly convinced that this new German question must be answered by a new German realism.

What does that mean?

First of all, it means being able to live with a paradox: on the one hand, Germany continues to depend on America's strategic protection. On the other hand, it must at the same time become a much more active upholder of the Western order.

While remaining a "receiver" in strategic terms, Germany must, at the same time, become a much more resolute strategic "giver".

We must be clear about this: We cannot provide our own nuclear deterrence, nor do we want to. This is why America must remain by our side and protect us.

At the same time, we Europeans will have to do ourselves much of what America has largely done for us so far, by diplomatic and by conventional military means. Securing NATO's eastern flank. Crisis management operations in our immediate neighborhood outside of Europe. Air and sea surveillance.

Both, the giving and the receiving, is not always easy to accept.

To be the receiver is to be dependent, to not have complete strategic autonomy, as the current discourse often stresses.

To be the giver would require us to take a firm power-political stance. To ambitiously play the geopolitical game. This is very difficult for us. Not to mention the financial cost of this new role.

Another new thing is the fact that both roles, that of giver and that of receiver, are much more intertwined than they used to be: We can only demand that our allies protect us if we ourselves give them more protection. Security given freely as a gift, that is a thing of the past.

This clearly shows – and that is an important point to me – *Westbindung* and Germany's coming of age in terms of security policy are closely linked to each other. Whether you are part of the West is also measured by whether you are prepared to defend it. Not only by military means, but that too.

Our *Westbindung* is therefore a fateful question both for us and for Europe. If there is to be a West in the future that we can have any '*Bindung*' to, we must stand up for it. More than before. And side by side with the United States. That is my conviction. And that is why, ladies and gentlemen, I am a transatlanticist.

And precisely because that is what I am, I should not hide the fact that right now, it is not always easy to commit to transatlanticism. Because it is not only up to us to ensure that this relationship is working.

Washington, too, must give us a sign that it considers the defense of our interests and values to be a joint project.

We have come against walls in recent years which I hope will not shape the future of our relationship.

Let me be perfectly clear: We are prepared to change our policies, have tough debates, adapt to new situations, and accept new realities when it comes to defense. But we will not stand for disruptive politics.

Our hope is that the broad lines of US policy will become more prominent again in the future.

This does not mean that we do not understand the changes that are happening in the world and in the balance of power.

We know that in the decades to come, American foreign policy will inevitably differ from what it was in the past. The geopolitical situation requires this.

But this does not mean either that we should look down upon the very thing that has proved so successful in the transatlantic relationship: NATO and its Alliance solidarity.

Europe's security depends on NATO.

Aggressive Russian policies make this plain, as do the many other crises and conflicts spreading across our continent from the northeast to the southwest.

But let me add this: It is not only the Europeans who need NATO. America needs this Alliance too. Because

- NATO makes the United States a European power.
- NATO provides the United States with a reliable circle of Allies.
- NATO allows the United States to prove to the whole world that it lives up to its promises.
- NATO, which grants the power of veto to even the smallest of its members, allows America to show its cooperative, integrative and protective side. America is not a hegemon that demands unconditional allegiance. This is without precedent in history.

But even looking at all this, there are still some Americans who are not convinced that they need NATO. I understand that. Because there is one thing still missing:

That is for the Europeans to take powerful action themselves, when push comes to shove. So that the United States can see Europe as a strong partner on equal terms, not as a damsel in distress.

As you can see: the German dilemma is a European dilemma as well. We stay dependent, but at the same time, we must come into our own.

In strengthening Europe like this, Germany must play a key role.

Let us therefore talk a little more about our part, the German part of the transatlantic agreement. The part that we must deliver.

In ten days, the Americans will vote in the presidential and congressional elections. In Germany, too, the parliamentary elections coming up in the fall very clearly cast their shadows before.

Against this political background, we Germans must ask ourselves what we can offer a future government in Washington that

- first of all, demonstrates to the United States and our Allies what we are prepared to pay a price for,
- second, bridges the paradox of being a receiver and a giver at the same time, and,
- third, strengthens Europe so considerably as to enable it to operate more independently of and more closely with the United States at the same time.

We must, for that matter, make this offer regardless of who will win the presidential elections on November 3.

Let me outline for you the basic elements that such an offer must entail.

First: we have to prove that we are serious about our defense – even under the financial strain that the coronavirus pandemic will cause.

We have set a good example with the 2021 budget: Defense spending will not be cut in spite of Covid-19. Quite the contrary, it will even see a slight increase. This means that the capability build-up that we have committed to within NATO is possible even in hard times.

Now we have to stay on track, also with a view to the coming years, when things are not going to be easier.

This also sends an important signal to Washington. Only if we take our own defense seriously can we expect the United States to do the same.

Second: Let me address the major topic of China.

As a leading export nation, we Germans are greatly concerned about how China has positioned itself in international trade matters. Our concerns include

- currency manipulations that have been going on for a long time;
- aggressive appropriation of intellectual property;
- unequal investment conditions;
- state-subsidized distortion of competition.

Our partners in the European Union and many other nations share these concerns, including the United States.

But we do not support every position and every initiative by the government in Washington on this issue. Especially when it comes to trade, a functioning multilateralism is in Germany's interest.

Our goal is therefore not to increase isolation, but to strengthen the global regulatory framework, with the WTO at its core, in order to achieve prosperity for everyone through free markets and open trade routes.

German interests – and European interests – need a system that can counter these two threats to liberal trade: China’s aggressively controlled state capitalism and the attempt at unilateral isolation and decoupling that we are currently seeing in Washington.

I therefore propose that we take on the challenge of global competition on the basis of a newly consolidated Western trade alliance.

It should not be an absurd idea to negotiate an agreement between the European Union and the United States that would completely remove all customs duties and trade restrictions between the transatlantic partners. And that is open to anyone who wants to strengthen and support the liberal, rules-based order.

Rather than a particularly good economic deal, such an agreement would be a strong signal of growth, free and fair trade and global standards that would be clearly understood worldwide – including where this is most needed.

Third: We have to ease some of the burden the United States is shouldering as a regulatory power, particularly in our own neighborhood.

What is keeping us from showing increased presence in the Baltic region, the North Sea, the Balkans, and in the Mediterranean? After all, this is predominantly to ensure our own European security!

European and German foreign policy must not get lost in the details of project management. In our immediate neighborhood we must stand up for democracy and an open society, but of course also for our interests and our security. This must be reflected much more clearly by our strategy.

Fourth: Germany should commit very resolutely to the continuation of Nuclear Sharing within NATO and approve the required resources.

With this in mind, I submitted a proposal for the successor system to our Tornado aircraft in April.

Nuclear sharing is not an end in itself; it has a political objective.

As long as there are nuclear states who actively challenge our community of values, we need a strong negotiating position. Nuclear sharing serves this purpose, today as it has done in the past.

The threat that we are facing is unfortunately not sufficiently recognized in Germany: Only a few hundred kilometers from our borders, Russia has stationed cruise missiles and modern rockets that can reach Germany with very little advance warning. This was done in secret and in violation of current arms control treaties. The nuclear threat potential emanating from Russia has increased dramatically.

Of course, we are all too aware of the fact that European security is about more than just nuclear threats. We are not losing sight of conventional threats, and we are preparing our capabilities so we can effectively counter them.

But I am especially emphasizing nuclear sharing because it is so central and symbolic, and because it sometimes threatens to slip into the realm of the unspeakable here. And also because this topic requires a special effort from us Germans.

Let me be very clear about this: nuclear sharing is about deterrence and about having a say, about credibility and responsibility in the Alliance, but also about demonstrating our commitment to collective defense and burden sharing.

It is above all the political value of nuclear sharing that is of such paramount importance. It shows that we have understood the seriousness of the strategic situation and that we are prepared to do the right thing.

In the last few months I have been working hard on this, and believe me, it is not a popular thing to do. But it has to be done. As the United States' key partner in this context we should send a clear signal of our commitment as soon as possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- My personal influences and experiences,
- the insight that the United States will remain the nation we cannot do without,
- knowing that Germany's *Westbindung* is crucial for Europe's destiny,
- the need for our country's coming of age in terms of foreign and security policy,
- the conviction that a strong NATO and a strong Europe are just as indispensable for the US as they are for us –

these are the pillars on which my friendship and my sympathy for the transatlantic relations rest.

Under the roof that is supported by these five pillars, freedom lives. And where freedom lives, you will also find disagreement, conflict, a competition of ideas – in short: democracy.

And that is why, as we are approaching an election year with hot debates about the politics of our country, we must not forget to whom we Germans owe this freedom above all.

Gratitude is not a question of time or of current affairs. It does not have a use-by date. No matter what we may think in these turbulent times and in our impatience towards current US policy: Our reason to be grateful remains.

Let me put it very clearly: Uncritical allegiance is not a good way to demonstrate this gratitude. The same goes for automatic reactions to a distorted image of the United States, or thinking we have to give good advice.

The best way to show our gratitude is to now defend the values of freedom ourselves, to which America has contributed in this country like no other.

As a strong Germany, in Europe and in the world.

If there even is such a thing as paying back a historic act of generosity, then we can do it by defending our common legacy.

Steuben and Schurz, in whose names we are meeting here today, are representative of this legacy.

They were the transatlanticists of their time, who followed the call of the West and with their skills and their European values contributed to building America.

It is our responsibility to continue to cultivate this common legacy.

Let us take the appropriate steps together, based on our historical obligations and the necessities of the present, even – and especially! – if it requires some political feats of strength.

Thank you.