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Toward a nuclear-free world: a German view

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In 2007 Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, William Perry and Sam Nunn issued an appeal for a world free of nuclear weapons.

Their knowledge and experience as respected secretaries of state and defense and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee under Republican and Democrat administrations gave their concerns about the growing nuclear threat special weight.

Being realists, they knew that the abolition of all nuclear weapons could only be achieved gradually, and therefore they proposed urgent practical steps aimed at realizing this vision.

The appeal met with broad approval and prominent support in the United States; as far as we know no supporting decisions by European governments were issued.

Our responses takes into account Germany's expectations of the incoming Obama administration.

Our century's keyword is cooperation. No global problem - be it the issue of environment and climate protection, providing for the energy needs of a growing world population or tackling the financial crisis - can be resolved by confrontation or the use of military force. America bears a special and indispensable responsibility.

This is all the more true when the number of countries possessing nuclear weapons or acquiring the capability to produce such weapons - and thus the raw material for terrorism on a catastrophic scale - is increasing. At the same time, existing nuclear-weapon states are developing new nuclear arms.

We unreservedly support the call by Messrs. Kissinger, Schultz, Perry and Nunn for a turnaround on nuclear policy, and not only in their country. This applies in particular to the following proposals:

- The vision of a world free of the nuclear threat, as developed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik, must be rekindled.
- Negotiations aimed at drastically reducing the number of nuclear weapons must begin, initially between the United States and Russia, the countries with the largest number of warheads, in order to win over the other countries possessing such weapons.
- The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) must be greatly reinforced.
- America should ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty.
- All short-range nuclear weapons must be destroyed.

From Germany's point of view it must be added:

- The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) expires this year. Its extension is the most urgent item on the agenda for Washington and Moscow.
- It will be vital to the credibility of the 2010 NPT Review Conference that nuclear-weapon states finally keep their promise under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to reduce their nuclear arsenals.
- The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty must be restored. Outer space may only be used for peaceful purposes.

Cooperation in the interests of shared security enabled Presidents George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev to eliminate the mutual threat posed by medium-range nuclear missiles at the end of the Cold War and, in 1990, to undertake the largest-ever conventional disarmament effort. In more than 18 years since then, what we now call the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) has become the basis for Europe's stability. To this day it continues to address the interests of all concerned.

That stability has been strong and reliable enough to withstand German reunification and the end of the Warsaw Pact, to survive the implosion of the Soviet Union, to enable Baltic States to regain their sovereignty and to stand up to NATO and EU enlargement and the realities of the world at the beginning of 2009.

These arrangements would be jeopardized for the first time by the American desire to station missiles and a radar system on extra-territorial bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, on NATO's eastern border.

A return to the era of confrontation, leading to a new arms race and new tension, can be best avoided by an agreement on missile defenses that would also serve the interests of NATO and the EU - that is, a restored ABM Treaty. This would also make it easier to adapt the CFE Treaty and pave the way for a greater dimension in arms controls.

Barack Obama called in Berlin for Cold War mindsets to be overcome. This ties in with the ideas discussed following the end of the Cold War under the motto, "security stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok." Gorbachev was unable to realize his vision of a European house; Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has now called for a new pan-European security structure.

We recommend giving this opportunity careful consideration. Security and stability for the northern hemisphere can only be achieved through stable and reliable cooperation among America, Russia, Europe and China.

This cooperation would respect existing NATO, European Union and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) agreements and, if necessary, take its own institutional shape. Stable security in the northern hemisphere would certainly defuse global crises and make them easier to resolve.

Serious endeavors by the United States and Russia toward a nuclear-weapons-free world would make it easier to reach an agreement on adequate behavior with all other nuclear-weapon states, regardless whether they are permanent members of the UN Security Council. A spirit of cooperation could spread from the Middle East via Iran to East Asia.

Due to its policy of détente, backed up by its allies, Germany created the preconditions for its self-determination. Germany owes its peaceful reunification to the "2+4 Treaty" (signed in 1990 by East and West Germany and the four occupying powers: the U.S., Soviet Union, Britain and France) in which the principle of cooperation across former borders proved its worth.

The treaty enabled historic progress to be made on disarmament and arms control for Europe as a whole. One result was the NATO-Russia Council, which can only be fully effective in a spirit of cooperation. Relics from the age of confrontation are no longer adequate for our new century.

Partnership fits in badly with the still-active NATO and Russian doctrine of nuclear first use, even if neither side is being attacked with such arms. A general non-first-use treaty between the nuclear-weapon states would be an urgently-needed step.

Germany, which has renounced the use of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, has every reason to call on the nuclear-weapon states not to use nuclear weapons against countries not possessing such arms. We are also of the opinion that all remaining U.S. nuclear warheads should be withdrawn from German territory.

Cooperation, our century's keyword, and secure stability in the northern hemisphere can become milestones on the route to a nuclear-weapon-free world.

This is our answer to the appeal issued by Messrs. Kissinger, Schultz, Perry and Nunn.

The writers all held high office in the Federal Republic of Germany: Helmut Schmidt, a Social Democrat, was chancellor 1974-1982; Richard von Weizsäcker, a Christian Democrat, was president 1984-1994; Egon Bahr, a minister in Social Democratic governments, was an architect of the policy of "ostpolitik"; Hans-Dietrich Genscher, of the Free Democrats, was foreign minister 1974-1992.