

Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on Norms and Interests in Foreign Policy (January 4, 2018)

Abstract

In this excerpt from a longer interview, foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) responds to questions about Germany's and Europe's role in a rapidly changing world. He explains that both must find their place in an environment where norms and interest are often in a relationship of mutual tension.

Source

“In a world of carnivores, vegetarians have a hard time”

SPIEGEL: Minister Gabriel, let us begin the new year with visions: when you imagine German foreign policy in 2028 – what will it look like?

Gabriel: I hope that it will be part of a European foreign policy, for even this strong country of Germany will not have a real voice in the world if it is not part of a European voice.

SPIEGEL: What will be the key points of this European foreign policy?

Gabriel: What is certain is that we need a foreign policy in which we define common European interests. So far we often define European values, yet when it comes to defining common interests, we are much too weak. To avoid any misunderstanding right off the bat: we must not belittle our values of freedom, democracy and human rights. On the contrary. But the political scientist Herfried Münkler is right: "To take only normative positions, to focus only on values will not be successful in a world of hard stakeholders. In a world of carnivores, vegetarians have a hard time."

SPIEGEL: Germany has not learned this political toughness.

Gabriel: In the past we could rely on the French, British and above all the Americans to assert our interests in the world. We have always criticized the USA as a world policeman, and often rightly so. But today we see what happens when the U.S. pulls back. There is simply no vacuum in international politics. When the United States leaves a space, other powers enter immediately. In Syria, these are Russia and Iran. In trade policy, it is China. These examples show that in the end, we will no longer achieve either the dissemination of our European values or the promotion of our interests.

SPIEGEL: Are you quite sure that the U.S. feels bound to the obligation to the alliance according to Article 5 of NATO?

Gabriel: We are glad that Donald Trump and the U.S. have affirmed Article 5. But one should not overstretch trust in that. At the same time, Europe, even if European structures are strengthened, cannot defend itself without the U.S.

SPIEGEL: How do you see Germany's role in the world today?

Gabriel: Today we are a haven, just as the U.S. was a haven from the eighteenth to the twentieth century for all those in search of freedom, prosperity, and democracy.

SPIEGEL: Are you talking explicitly about Germany, or does that assessment apply to all of Europe?

Gabriel: Certainly the European Union as a whole stands for this hope. But of course Germany especially so because of its economic strength. Also because of its peacefulness. And if you now imagine that more than seventy years ago we were a terrible place, that people feared Germany, it is a wonderful development, first of all, that we changed from a terrible place to a place where people long to come.

SPIEGEL: You are describing an excessively idyllic present.

Gabriel: I do know that it is not easy for everyone to live in Germany with well-paid work. You need to have a lot of skill and accomplish a lot. And I also know that there is far too much poverty and injustice here, too. And yet, our parents and grandparents have built an incredibly prosperous and peaceful country. Of course, we must not underestimate how much all of this depends on our economic strength. The truth is that Moscow, Beijing and Washington have one thing in common: they do not value the European Union at all. They disregard it.

SPIEGEL: Indeed, Europe does not seem all that robust.

Gabriel: With few exceptions, that also holds true for most authoritarian states. It is often the case that men who only seem strong represent economically and socially weak countries. The assertion of power and external confrontation often obscure the big problems internally. There is a danger that this authoritarian political style is now eating its way also into the Western world. And they all have in common that they elevate their national interests above those of the world community. We Europeans do not do that. But that is precisely why these authoritarian states tend to smile condescendingly at us. I am convinced: we live in an era of competition between democratic and authoritarian states. And the latter are already trying to gain influence in the European Union and to divide us. The first cracks in Europe are visible. We will have to defend our freedom much more in the future than we did in the past.

SPIEGEL: Because our liberal democracy is not efficient?

Gabriel: Because today there is a constant consideration of output: What prosperity does this or that generate? What does it provide in terms of strength, technology, political and military influence? People are asking less and less whether this development is democratic and free. Europe is in a phase in which it is not delivering this output sufficiently visibly and palpably. We still have a youth unemployment that is much too high, we have not solved our currency problems, and living conditions in Europe are drifting apart. That is also why critics say that our Europe is a model of yesterday. That is a great danger for us Europeans: we must show that those who look at us in this way are mistaken, that we can agree, that as a community of democratic and free states we are economically successful and gain political influence. To achieve this, Europe must also develop a power projection.

SPIEGEL: Must Europe be feared?

Gabriel: No, not feared. On the contrary. Countries that cooperate with us should feel more secure than if they do so with non-democratic regimes. Why is Europe not building an infrastructure in Africa, but is leaving that to China? Why are we unable to advance the economic development in the Eastern European neighboring states on the Balkans, and are leaving those countries to the growing influence of Russia? In an uncomfortable world, we Europeans can no longer take it easy and wait for the U.S.

SPIEGEL: That is to say, democracy must become more efficient.

Gabriel: We are a very efficient country. But it's not about efficiency, but about the long-term preservation of our European business model. Incidentally, this claim that democracy and efficiency are contradictory is nonsense. The history of democracy itself already shows as much, since only democracies were and are able to learn from mistakes. One could rather ask whether it is not a country like China, which is economically enormously successful, that is in fact inefficient – given its

environmental destruction or its corruption. However, from China's perspective, it is undoubtedly the democratic model that is inferior.

SPIEGEL: Don't you sometimes think Europe is dysfunctional?

Gabriel: For years we have been hearing about the multi-speed Europe, a Europe of different speeds. One should be grateful if this were so, for then all would at least be moving in the same direction, only at different speeds. In reality, unfortunately, we have long had a multi-track Europe: very different objectives. The traditional differences between North and South in finance and economic policy are far less problematic than those between Eastern and Western Europe. In the South and the East, China is steadily gaining influence, so much so that some European member states no longer dare to make decisions against Chinese interests. You notice it everywhere: China is the only country in the world with a real geopolitical strategy.

SPIEGEL: The strategy to divide Europe?

Gabriel: No, but to increase China's influence.

SPIEGEL: Values and interests can collide. Do values lose, then?

Gabriel: No, that's not what it means. First of all, I am in favor of withstanding this tension, of creating it, in the first place.

SPIEGEL: You've been accused, with a view toward the protests in Iran, of not urging clearly enough the adherence to values. How do you see the situation in Iran: are we experiencing an Iranian spring right now?

Gabriel: That is hard to judge. So far the protests have been borne by very different groups. There are no leading figures nor a common political agenda. However, it is also clear that the discontent in Iran has reasons, economic and political reasons. We've told the Iranian leadership time and again, that in the final analysis the economic recovery of the country can happen only through more international economic cooperation. But that presupposes not only that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons, but that Iran's role in the region overall must become much more peaceful. We have offered to finally enter into real negotiations and talks about this.

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