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Former German Minister of Foreign Affairs

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Joschka, would you be slightly more optimistic about the role that Europe can play in the years to come and would you start as a German and end up as a European in your comments?

Joschka FISCHER, Former German Minister of Foreign Affairs

Thank you very much. I think that there is no reason for pessimism, but for realism. There is an important difference. Compared with the past, I think that our generation and the younger generation are not in a situation where we should be too pessimistic, if you compare today with what happened in the 20th Century. When we think back, as we are sitting here all together as Europeans, to what our parents and grandparents had to go through, we are in a very privileged situation.

I think that in the 21st Century the defining force will be the rise of the new powers or, even more, the desire of the people to get out of poverty and achieve the same living standard that we have been used to in the West and also in the more prosperous parts of emerging countries in the meantime. That means 7 billion people and more. With the present technologies and the kinds of distribution there are, that is not going to happen. A new industrial revolution, a so-called green revolution, will therefore transform, together with the transformation of the global political system, the 21st Century and I think that that is an extremely important and positive development.

Secondly, we are talking about the redistribution of power when we look at the international system and a shift from the West to the East. The West has lost its monopoly. Is that terrible? I do not think so. It is positive because it is a consequence of globalisation and together with the first tendency that I described I think that it will define the future. Will this be without contradictions? Definitely not. Will there be conflicts? Yes. However, I think that the underlying element will be cooperation because with 7 billion people and the new communication reality and the common challenges, cooperation that is also based on competition will be an important factor.

The challenge for Europeans will be whether we are open enough to reorganise ourselves - even the big three, with the most powerful two being France and the UK, as permanent members of the Security Council and nuclear powers, and Germany having the biggest economy and population. In the 21st Century, we will be a family-owned business – a mid-size, but smaller-sized family-owned business – and if we want to have a strong voice, I do not believe that the traditional formula of post-World War II will work anymore because our American cousins will be drawn into the Pacific, based on the interests and challenges there and on growth expectations.

Looking at the challenges that we have, starting from the Balkans, with our neighbour, Russia, and the states in between and the Middle-East, Mediterranean and Africa, I think that Europeans need to grow up very soon. Can we do that at the traditional 19th Century national level? Definitely not. What is the answer? The answer is the United States of Europe. What does that mean? Does it mean an American system? Definitely not. Why not? It is because all our nations are much older than the US states were in the founding period of the United States, with different languages, cultures, prejudices, traditions and so on.

However, I think that there is a way forward. What we now see is that the crisis is a good teacher. The crisis forced Mr Sarkozy, Mrs Merkel and all the others into a certain direction and they tried to get around the painful question of sovereignty and legitimacy. However, in the end, the financial crisis in Europe demonstrated that the core of the crisis



is not financial. That is true for America, where there is a financial crisis, as there is in Europe, but the core is a governance crisis. We have a political crisis in Europe because we have a common currency in the EU 17 and a common Central Bank, but what we do not have is a common Treasury or common Government, with no common Parliament or common policies. This must be changed. I think that the recent decision taken on Friday was a huge step forward in that direction. It does not answer the question of the quick fixes needed to address the immediate crisis but I think that everything is now in place to move into a fiscal union. From a German point of view, I have to say that there is no longer any excuse for a German Government and the Bundesbank to say that they do not want to act because all the stability mechanisms that they were asking for are now in place. I therefore predict, possibly within a few weeks, that we will have another serious crisis with a state on the periphery in the Mediterranean, but I think that this time preparations have been made for a more serious firewall and more direct action.

However, there is still the open question that this step towards a fiscal union that we saw on Friday is step number one and there is the need for step number two, the political union. In the end, if things get serious, you also need the budgetary right of the national Parliaments in the EU 17+ and I think that this will lead to a new definition of political union – or not to a new definition, but to a real political union, and you can see the structures today. The national Parliaments and Governments are the real players and not the Commission or the European Parliament. I am fine with that as a federalist because I am more interested in the outcome than in principles.

I have to say that if you think about it, for a European Government, it would make sense. If we had the national Parliaments being brought together with representatives for a Euro chamber, it would make real sense and you could always think that there would be a role for the European Parliament as another chamber of the European structure. However, that is beyond the horizon. What I can see is the emergence of a new governance reality in Europe and I think that there is also an opportunity to overcome these problems within the next two years. If we want to end the crisis, we have to address these governance issues and reading the results from Friday, I am quite optimistic that we are moving in that direction.

There is an urgent time pressure because Europe cannot be consumed by its internal problems. Our neighbourhood is a big challenge and in response to our Singaporean friends, perhaps Europeans are dispensable, but my answer is to wait and see. I would not be too astonished if, at the end the decade, we will see who is and is not dispensable. I promise you that I am quite optimistic that Europe will play a very important role in the 21st Century.