

# **What lies ahead for the West?**

**Speech given by former Federal President Horst Köhler  
at the ‘Future of the West’ conference  
held by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung**

**Bonn on 14 January 2015**

*English translation, original in German.*

## **I.**

I am pleased that the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has organised a conference on the future of the West and delighted that you have invited me to speak on the subject. ‘The future’ and ‘the West’ are two terms that are worth reflecting on. What do they really signify? What sets of meanings have they had in the past, and what do they mean now? As we know, words can lose their meaning if they are used thoughtlessly and can even be lost entirely from our lexicon if we stop reflecting on them.

In English, the word ‘future’ derives originally from the idea of ‘growing’ or ‘becoming’. ‘Becoming’ may mean different things: we may become something as a result of external forces, without any action on our part, but it may also ‘become us’ (in the sense of befitting us) to act in a particular way in line with our nature, our abilities or our responsibilities. This meaning shifts the emphasis onto how we shape our future, what others can expect of us, and what our abilities dictate that we do.

I find this shift of meaning interesting. What lies ahead for the West? I believe the question can most appropriately be answered by breaking it down into further questions. What is the West’s responsibility? How can it behave appropriately? What do the West’s strengths and abilities dictate that it can – and should – be doing? In short, what should the West become?

## **II.**

Then there is the second part of the title of this conference; what actually is ‘the West’? It’s a slippery concept and one that resists precise definition, particularly in geographical terms.

The journalist and author Wolfgang Büscher walked from Berlin to Moscow in 2001. In his book ‘Berlin-Moscow. A Journey on Foot’, he describes how the West is a beacon in Europe: everyone wants to be part of the West, and wherever he asks: the East starts where the West ends, yet the West never does quite end, and so Büscher kept going, further and further, until he was on Moscow’s doorstep. And then he found that Moscow again perceives itself as being part of the West. Büscher’s experience is both curious and one that demands attention, even – or, perhaps, especially – now, when Russia and the West are increasingly alienated.

So what is ‘the West’? For the purpose of my speech today, I offer the following definitions.

In *conceptual* terms, I define ‘the West’ as the ideas embodied by three hills, Golgotha, the Acropolis and the Capitol – that is, as our Judaeo-Christian heritage, as the Greek philosophy of Man’s place in the world, and as the Roman model of the law. Conceptually, ‘the West’ means the belief in individual dignity and freedom that derives from these religious and philosophical foundations. And this belief has been given concrete form through its practice (even where that practice is imperfect!), from the Magna Carta and the city states of Italy and Germany, whose very air conferred freedom, to the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution. In *historical* terms, ‘the West’ is for me an order forged out of a spirit of contention, a wholly justified scepticism about any monopoly (including the notion that the majority can have a monopoly on truth), the struggle for certainty of belief and scientific knowledge, the yearning for personal and social self-determination, the spirit of enterprise, and the centuries-old conviction that *freedom* before God and Man means being *accountable to* God and Man. Unfortunately, though, in historical terms, ‘the West’ has also come to mean laying crude claim to world domination and to the right to put others under our tutelage in order to ‘civilise’ them; it has come to mean a monstrous exercise of power that deploys the power of weaponry to overwhelm other cultures and exploits nature, that appropriates and consumes vastly more of the world’s wealth than anyone else. I would go further: the hiatus in Western thinking has produced monstrous radicalisation of thought and political totalitarianism of the kind that caused untold injustice and misery around the world during the 20th century.

### III.

All this, ladies and gentlemen, is wrapped up in what, as a kind of shorthand, we call ‘the West’ – everything of which Man is capable, from the noblest deeds to the most ignoble. We like to focus on the nobler, brighter end of the spectrum, but believe me, the darker end has not been forgotten, and those living in the East, South and North are only too well aware of it.

Against this backdrop, then, what does it befit the West to do? The first thing I would say is to act with *humility*. Too often in the past (up to our times), the West has failed to live up to its ideals., and therefore cannot behave as if it had the right to dominate the debate in the council of nations and was entitled to more than anyone else. Of course, after the Second World War, it was the Western Powers – and particularly the British and Americans as the victors – who created a new world order with the United Nations and its agencies, based on the renunciation of violence, of the right of peoples to determine their future, and of human rights. And all peace-loving nations were invited to work together in this new order. However, the Western nations have repeatedly, and flagrantly, breached this new order and its statutory protections. Just a few recent examples include the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the images of torture and humiliation of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and the US Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on CIA torture. (That the report was actually written and published can only be seen as a crumb of comfort.) Moreover, the West has failed to live up to its own ideal of the *responsibility* that underpins freedom: we only have to think of the fact that it were the West’s irresponsibility and complacency that led to the global financial crisis a few years ago (the root causes of which remain largely unresolved).

*Humility* is, then, an appropriate stance for the West. Its historical record is patchy, its credibility is shaken, and at present, it is not even materially prospering: for years now, the European Union has been mired in a debt and growth crisis, it is grappling with enormous demographic challenges, and there is scant evidence of its Common Foreign and Security Policy, which has also weakened the transatlantic alliance and left our American friends alternating between impatience and exasperation. And sometimes, these friends appear to be weary of the burden of having to counterbalance the forces of destruction. Many of the West's foreign policy hopes have been dashed, from the Arab Spring to state-building in crisis regions. The West's aspiration to shape the future, and its acknowledgment of what it can achieve, have bumped up against their limits. All that, too, calls for humility.

Nonetheless, humility does not exclude *self-confidence*; self-confidence, that is, not as triumphalism but as the expression of a calm confidence in the strength of our own values and in the firm will to assert and realise these values. Particularly those who no longer wish to demonstrate their superiority, who wish to narrow the gap between their words and their actions, and who strive to rediscover their own ideals should cherish and uphold these values and champion their validity. Thus it is particularly apt for a West that is willing to face its own failings and weaknesses, to advocate even more passionately for what it has come to understand to be right.

This means that the West must never let up in its efforts to bring its bright, exemplary side to the fore. It befits the West to come as close as it possibly can to realising its ideals of freedom, justice, responsibility and solidarity, to fill them with vigour, and to make them a beacon of peace beyond geographical borders.

And that brings me to the atrocities in Paris and the attack on freedom of the press and freedom of expression, on the French Republic, on a Western-style democracy, and on the values and beliefs we all share. It also, though, brings me to the millions of expressions of solidarity and the many powerful marches held last Sunday [11 January] in which both the French people and those from around the world gave an unequivocal response to the attacks: we will not be divided, we will not allow our future to be taken away from us and, most importantly, we will not surrender the freedom that underpins our ability to co-exist. We will keep the torch of freedom burning, the torch held by the Statue of Liberty that was given by the French people to the United States of America more than a century ago and that has become the global symbol of hope for the poor, the homeless and the 'huddled masses yearning to breathe free'. As long as we will protect this blaze of freedom, the West will always shine.

Protecting this blaze also means building on an international order that strives for peace and security, that is based on the rule of law, and that is open to all to participate in and cooperate with. It means defending and strengthening such an order. All this is what it becomes the West to do, with its defining features and its still formidable capacity. This is what it becomes the West to do – and this is what the West must become.



#### IV.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is very clear that the narrative currently dominating international relations is quite different from the narrative of the global Commonwealth of Nations, of freedom through law, of progress *for all* through cooperation. It is the evil old narrative of power politics and nationalism, of aggression and hegemony. It does not point the way forward, to the future, but backward, to the distant past. It sometimes seems as if the admittedly imperfect world *order* we all believe in is fragmenting before our very eyes into a world *disorder* ... The West needs to equip itself to fight such a regressive move and must do its utmost to prevent such a thing happening. I believe with all my heart that this is possible – but only if we learn to distinguish between the destructive disintegration of an order and the constructive force of unrest and change that the West cannot avoid. I believe that this year, 2015, could be a major opportunity to make this distinction – and a major opportunity to build a truly inclusive world order.

To seize this opportunity, the West must (1) put its own house in order, (2) pull together, and (3) reach out to the rest of the world. What do I mean by that?

#### V.

(1) ‘Putting our own house in order’ is not a universally popular idea. Isn’t it the case that those who believe in Western ideals and do not want to accept second-best practice rapidly come to be seen as rocking the boat? Aren’t Western societies themselves too comfortable and complacent about their achievements, isn’t there too much tranquil lethargy and too little idealistic restlessness when confronting the supposed boundaries of what is possible? My view, at least, is that we should start taking the virtue of self-critical review a little more seriously and, perhaps, also find the courage within ourselves to change; these are, after all, the things that made the West strong in the first place! And the list of what requires a fearlessly critical eye is long.

The link between freedom and responsibility has become loose in the West. Within financial institutions, the connection between freedom, risk and the requirement to accept (personal) liability has been severed. In the area of public debt and climate change policy, we no longer see inter-generational responsibility; the current generation is living at the expense of future generations. In Western democracies, the connection between the will of the people and state actors has weakened as a result of lobbyists and donors having inappropriate influence, and of the dominance of small cliques of experts. And our societies are in danger of losing their sense of responsibility for community and for each other: we quite rightly no longer see tax evasion as a mere peccadillo, yet when I look at the parallel societies of the super-rich that isolate themselves from the rest of society, withdrawing their solidarity, it makes me very angry indeed.

If that is to change, then the Western order needs incentives and intervention. I know that there are many building sites with a lot of work going on, but are we digging deeply enough? As long as financial institutions are still seen as ‘too big to fail’ and as long as there is no real,

*genuine* culture shift within the financial services industry, there will be freedom without responsibility, and taxpayers will be held hostage. As long as public debt far exceeds any reasonable criterion of stability, momentum for economic growth will be hobbled and the financial markets will continue to wield an unhealthy influence. As long as EU concepts for greater innovation and growth – the Lisbon Strategy or Europe 2020 – exist only on the drawing board, as long as there is still no will to prioritise investments in education, training, research and innovation, and as long as Europe’s policymakers continue to sidestep crucial structural reform, unemployment in Europe will remain high and the opportunities for those with low skills levels will narrow. And as long as the influence of uninhibited donor money grows in western parliaments and the United States persists with an almost dysfunctional political culture, nothing much is likely to change. We need to ‘dig deep’ to identify and counteract threats to freedom and democracy. And in my view, that also includes being sufficiently aware so as not to make the functioning of our democracies dependent on an unreflective understanding of growth.

The rest of the world is watching closely to see if the West will put its house in order. And as far as I can see, the world is doing so in most cases without *schadenfreude* or animosity, even though it has long had to take lectures and proselytising from the West. No, most other nations, even – or, perhaps, particularly – those well-disposed to the West, are simply wondering what they can expect of the West in terms of international cooperation in future and, especially, what they can expect of its soft power. Sometimes, I am a little surprised by how indifferent – blind, even – we have grown to the image that others have of us. Trust is the most underestimated resource in international politics, and you cannot gain trust unless you are credible. Am I really so naïve in hoping that a policy of *truthfulness* – of honest dealings with each other and with our own weaknesses – is possible? At the very least, I cannot imagine that the West will regain the trust it has squandered without working hard on its credibility and without recognising that its own duplicity is a problem – in short, without putting its own house in order.

However, an orderly house will achieve its aims only if as many people as possible are involved, and that brings me to the second item on my to-do list for Europe: (2) pulling together.

First of all, this is a challenge for Europe. The vision and concrete goal of European policy must continue to be a political union that invests Europe with its own identity and ability to act. I believe the policy adopted by the German Federal Government of linking support to crisis states with an expectation of long-term structural reform is the right one (although the most recent pension reforms in Germany sent out a wrong signal in this respect). Now, however, I believe it would be wise and helpful in economic terms to complement this policy with a robust German programme for private and public sector investment, giving an extra boost to the Juncker Plan in the process. We should be ready to go this extra mile – and Germany’s financial policy situation means that we can.

A strong European Union is, not least, a condition for making Europe a serious, self-confident and trustworthy partner for the United States. The debate – and, perhaps, the hand-wringing – about the transatlantic relationship is, of course, always current, and both the old and the new West are constantly accusing each other of not keeping their eye on the ball, of living on another planet, or of drifting apart.

There are two things to say in this context. First, yes, there are differences in many areas, from military intervention to welfare, but the fault line does not run clearly between ‘Europeans’ and ‘Americans’. Europe has nothing remotely resembling a single European social model (let alone one that has long-term funding), and nor does the United States. Like many Europeans, many US nationals are against capital punishment and private gun ownership, and many US states have banned both. The United States also has both hawks and doves in foreign policy terms. Meanwhile, many Europeans were in favour of the Iraq war in 2003 (including, or so we hear, some belonging to the party supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung), while many Americans opposed it, including, for example, Barack Obama. We should not get side-tracked by the things that, as we see it, separate Europe as a whole from the United States as a whole. It is far more constructive to talk about the things that unarguably bind us together. Second, we belong to the same family of peoples with shared historical roots and similar legislation, constitutions and values. As Timothy Garton Ash has written, ‘It is impossible, on a sober analysis, to discern any major differences of long-term interest between Europe, America and the other rich and free countries of the West.’

We should, therefore, be striving to inject new substance, new dignity, and new value into the term ‘transatlantic partnership’; as I have already mentioned, words can lose their meaning if they are used thoughtlessly, and may even disappear from our lexicon. President George Bush Senior once spoke of the United States, the Germans and the Europeans as ‘partners in leadership’. Doesn’t that expression mean a partnership of equals? So what became of it? There were, of course, lots of areas in which Europeans could have shown leadership as genuine partners, and this includes saying something like ‘Just hang on a moment, where are we actually going with this?’ In my view, the whole saga with the NSA is one of the less harmful examples in this respect; I am far angrier that, as the revelations about torture were coming to light, Europe did not assert itself as an equal partner, one that speaks out strongly if it sees shared values being threatened. Pulling together does not, after all, mean blindly following or unthinkingly going along with things. In our relationship with the United States, pulling together means:

- Coordinating *all* major areas of global policy. Such coordination will not always produce a common standpoint, but it has at least three advantages. (1) As far as the Americans are concerned, it avoids the temptation of seeing Europe merely as a pool of allies from which to cherry-pick as the need arises. (2) It forces the Member States of the European Union to professionalise their Common Foreign and Security Policy so that it can speak at least for a majority of members in real time. There, too, we have a long way to go, I fear. But if we don’t embark on the journey now, then when? The European External Action Service is a good idea, but all it has delivered so far is a kind of subordinate foreign policy in addition

to the foreign policies of individual Member States (in all their colourful diversity). We have to reverse this situation in the medium term! (3) A consistent coordination of positions will protect the transatlantic relationship against becoming too narrowly focused either on security or on economic issues, while greater breadth and diversity will make the relationship easier to access for the perspective of non-Western countries.

- Pulling together also means finding a shared understanding of the robustness of democracy. Since the end of the Cold War, Western Europeans have relied far too heavily on the United States' security policy strengths. That has done nothing to enhance the weight that European views carry. European members of NATO, including Germany, have pledged to spend a higher proportion of their GDP on defence expenditure. This is a pledge that must be kept, not merely as an end in itself but because one major way in which the substance of a partnership is expressed is in the ability to assume responsibility, in military terms as well as in other areas. That requires a shared clarity about what the West is willing to fight for. And yes, of course, it also includes grappling with the extent to which the concept of defence and protection has been abused in the past.

In relation to the current crisis in Eastern Europe, it seems clear to me that long-term security in Europe can only be achieved by acting *with*, not *against*, Russia. Greater European seriousness in a transatlantic security alliance has nothing to do with aggression and is not *per se* directed against others. And, taken on its own merits, it also falls far short of what is required. We need to pay at least as much attention to the third area that the West needs to focus on: reaching out the hand of cooperation to the world.

## VI.

If I had to choose just one word to sum up the 21st century world, then that word would be 'interdependence' – the interlinking of economic, environmental and social interests. In a speech to mark US Independence Day in 1962, President John F. Kennedy called for a 'Declaration of Interdependence' between the United States and the emerging European Union. Coming as it did on such a pregnant occasion for Americans, this call was a powerful emotional signal of what modern sovereignty means: becoming aware of our own interdependence, of how entwined our own interests are with those of others, of how dependent we are on others, and particularly on the opportunities that community offers. Modern, responsible, smart sovereignty always has this interdependence in mind. It knows that we are all in the same boat. The threatening conflicts of the 21st century are not between 'us' and 'them', nor are they between 'the West' and 'the rest', but between us and our grandchildren, between short-term and long-term interests.

One of the most vital strategic challenges of our time is, therefore, to replace the old models of state egotism, of the pragmatism of power, and of the politics of violence with a new grand narrative about peaceful equilibrium, shared efforts for the benefit of all, and peace through law and through an equitable distribution of burdens. The West should, thus, put its energies into working to develop the international institutions in a way that they are better geared to cooperation and into conducting its international relations with a new spirit of cooperation,



solidarity and mutual accountability. In other words, we need a new paradigm for international politics – a leitmotif of global partnership. This leitmotif sets national policy in a wider context of the global common good. I am pleased that the German Government has taken up this issue in its positioning on the current UN negotiation processes.

The central reform priorities for an international policy of partnership are obvious. We urgently need an effective climate regime, a fairer and more development friendly global trade system is long overdue, and we need a genuinely multilateral monetary system. And we urgently require a stronger United Nations, with reform of the Security Council as the top priority. Let me stress, though, that I am thinking not of a seat on the Security Council for Germany but of a seat for Europe ...

All these reforms must be geared to tackling the two greatest human challenges of our age: putting an end to extreme poverty – that is, prosperity and dignity for all! – and protecting our planet's natural resources. These issues are currently the focus of intensive debate within the United Nations. In the early summer, there will be a ground-breaking conference on the architecture of international development financing, and in the winter, the key points of an effective climate regime will be set out in Paris (and yes, the time has come for a global carbon tax!). Meanwhile, this September, the world community will adopt a new global development agenda as part of the Post-2015 Development Agenda process. This agenda is intended to apply universally– not just to the developing countries, as in the past, but also, and explicitly, to the industrialised nations and the emerging economies, where changes are also needed. Three major multilateral processes reach their climax this year ... this is not a mere talking shop for international technocrats and naïve idealists, but a substantial and genuine window of opportunity to the future: the opportunity to create prospects for the world's young people and to be a beacon of hope for the poor, the homeless, the huddled masses. I see this process as a huge strategic opportunity to shift the current course away from rampant disorder and back towards something that will unify and create trust, a powerful narrative of international cooperation, the dawn of a new era of global partnership. What 2015 offers us is a significant opportunity. It is an opportunity for the West especially. The West can take the lead here. It can demonstrate that it is still in the vanguard.

Would it not ultimately reap dividends if the heads of state and government thrashed out their differences and prefaced the new global development agenda with a modern 'Declaration of Interdependence'? That would send a powerful signal that politics had actually arrived in this new era of mutual dependence. It would be compelling evidence that the international community still believes in a shared positive future for the planet. And if the planet has a future, then we will not need to be so concerned about the future of the West.