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German foreign policy is not able to cope with the Syrian crisis!

The television pictures of slaughtered Syrian children are just as hard to bear for politicians as they are for ordinary citizens. The endless killing, the despair, the hopelessness of the refugees in the camps – all this leaves us with a feeling of impotent rage. The horrific gas attack cannot remain without consequences; the global community must respond. But a responsible foreign policy has to be more than simply acting for the sake of acting. The motive for military action cannot simply be to relieve the burden of public pressure, nor can it be an act of mere conscience-salving. The millions of Syrians who are suffering so dreadfully in this civil war deserve better.

Syria must be a top priority at the G20 Summit that begins today. The summit offers a last chance to break the spiral of violence and to finally make a new serious, genuine attempt to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict. It is up to Germany to persuade the two leading players, the United States and Russia, to sit down at one table and thus ensure the proper, concerted involvement of the United Nations Security Council. However, considerable doubts exist as to whether German foreign policy is capable of achieving this. It has lost clout in Washington and its channels of communication with Moscow are barely functioning.

Preparations for military action against Assad and his regime are well advanced, and Congress is unlikely to deny President Obama its support for a limited strike. But even the staunchest hardliners are not comfortable with this. Everyone knows that the United States is caught in a terrible dilemma. President Obama is taking action in order to salvage his credibility. The fact that he has hesitated for so long shows that he is keenly aware of the dilemma: there is no evidence that the planned strike will improve the situation in Syria.

A few days ago, the International Crisis Group again summarised the main arguments against American military intervention. The military goals of an attack are as unclear as the political goals. The conflict threatens to escalate and spread to other countries. And it is not at all likely that Assad will go off as loser. If he and his regime survive the attacks without significant damage, he will appear stronger in the eyes of many. The most decisive point, however, is that the attacks will do nothing to prevent the hundreds of thousands of deaths and the displacement of millions. Of course we cannot simply shrug our shoulders at the criminal use of poison gas

against innocent civilians and children, but dropping bombs and deploying cruise missiles cannot be the answer. At a time when the suffering of so many innocent people is grieving us so deeply, we cannot adopt a strategy that would harm them further. The international community can only fulfil its responsibility to Syria by earnestly striving to achieve a political solution to the conflict. Let me make it quite clear: not a bombing campaign of two days will threaten Assad; what would really threaten his position is if the United States and Russia were to reconcile their differences and mend the split in the UN Security Council.

A year ago, US Senator Richard G. Lugar proposed to the Russian government that the two countries set up a security initiative with the goal of securing and destroying Syrian chemical weapons. Lugar rightly saw that this was in the interest of both Russia and the United States. Last week, Peer Steinbrück picked up on this proposal when he stated that the members of the UN Security Council should launch a concerted effort to control those chemical weapons. Despite all the disagreements the United States and Russia may have over the Syrian conflict, neither one can benefit from lowered inhibitions to using chemical weapons – and nor can any other country in the world. Just as terrifying is the thought that the terrorists of tomorrow will be equipped with mustard gas and sarin gas from Syrian stockpiles.

Moscow holds the key to ensuring a common stance among the international community. To date, President Putin has hindered a concerted approach. This is where Germany could play a role. Since the era of détente policy, Germany has often been in the position of keeping channels of communication open with Russia and seeking areas of common interest despite all differences of opinion. Unfortunately, these channels of communication between Berlin and Moscow are no longer as robust as they once were. This is partly due to a hardening of Russia's position; one sometimes gets the impression that President Putin enjoys provoking the West any way he can. But it is also a result of Mrs Merkel's shortsighted foreign policy, which seems to be directed purely at increasing her popularity at home and lacks any creative ambition.

Instead of standing idly on the sidelines, Mrs Merkel should take advantage of the summit in St. Petersburg and seize the initiative to finding a political solution. As proposed by Peer Steinbrück, such a solution must include UN experts conducting an immediate and thorough investigation into the gas attack of 21 August; it must include the UN Security Council unequivocally calling on Syria to swiftly ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention and to expose its weapons stockpiles to international scrutiny; and – particularly important – it must include another conference being held on achieving a political solution to the Syrian crisis, with the participation of the major opposing parties in Syria as well as other important players in the region, including Iran.