

Interview of the Korean daily newspaper “JoongAng Ilbo” and its English-language edition “Korea JoongAng Daily” with Joachim Gauck, President of the Federal Republic of Germany

1. What is the purpose of your state visit to South Korea? What are your expectations?

The main aim of my visit is to pay tribute to and strengthen the excellent relations between Germany and South Korea. President Park visited Germany last year. I have very good memories of her visit, and I was delighted to accept her warm invitation. It is a particular honour for me to be invited to give a speech to the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea during my visit.

There are many close ties between our countries. We work together in a wide range of fields. This cooperation, especially in business, research, education and science, is highly innovative and focused on the future. At the same time we have different concepts for further developments, for example in the field of education. We want to continue strengthening our partnership. And we should intensify our exchange of information, something that is important for both sides.

However, our countries' similar fates lend my visit during the 25th year of German reunification and the 70th year of Korea's division a symbolic importance. I myself come from East Germany, the GDR – that is, the part of our country that was under communist rule until 1989 and, therefore, was not free or democratic. I was active in the East German civil rights movement before 1989. After German reunification, I was in charge of safeguarding and managing the records of the State Security Service, the GDR regime's secret service. This is why my visit to your country and the border to North Korea and my meetings and talks with politicians, representatives of civil society and refugees from North Korea are very special, also for me personally. And of course, I am also looking forward to my first visit to a country that has such a rich and varied culture and tradition as Korea.

2. One often sees reports about economic and social inequality between eastern and western Germany. Young eastern Germans have told me personally that they are disadvantaged in comparison with their western German peers. How do you rate the economic and social developments since 1990? Is Germany really reunited?

Naturally, there are still economic differences between eastern and western Germany, but the success of the transformation can now be seen and felt widely. Infrastructure is good in eastern Germany; town centres have been renovated; and the environmental standard has improved dramatically since unification. If you compare eastern and western Germany's respective economic strength, the decisive factors – economic output, employment, unemployment and wages – in eastern Germany have become much closer to those in the western part of the country. Eastern Germany is also home to small and medium-sized enterprises that are internationally successful. Representatives of some of these firms will accompany me on my visit to Korea. People in eastern Germany are making good use of the opportunities available to them. This gives me grounds to say that German unification has also made good progress in economic and social terms.

However, many young people leave eastern Germany's rural areas. This was and still is a major problem in some regions. And it remains a political and social and societal challenge for those living in these regions and for policymakers.

3. *What role did Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr's Ostpolitik have in Germany's subsequent reunification? How do you personally rate Ostpolitik?*

"Change through rapprochement" was the motto of the new *Ostpolitik* drawn up and furthered by Willy Brandt and others from the mid-1960s, that is, shortly after the Berlin Wall was built. At the time, it was a highly innovative concept aimed at making that dreadful border more permeable and easier for people to cross. For example, an agreement on travel permits made it possible for East and West Germans to meet. This allowed families to stay in touch. And ultimately, this meant that the two parts of the country did not lose contact. When Willy Brandt was Federal Chancellor, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this policy and for reconciliation with West Germany's neighbours in the East. His policy was highly controversial at first, but all subsequent Federal Governments pursued and developed the line he had taken as Federal Chancellor. As a result, there were still close personal contacts between East and West despite decades of division. And despite its division, Germany always remained one nation. Along with the tremendous commitment shown by Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl, this was one of the reasons why Germany was able to reunite in peace and freedom.

4. *The Korean Government is hoping that you will have advice on Korea's Nordpolitik. On the basis of Germany's experience of division and reunification, what advice will you give Korea?*

Above all, I would like to encourage Koreans never to give up hope. People in North Korea also have a right to live in freedom and dignity. However, it is difficult to give specific advice. The historic, political, economic and social situation in pre-1989 divided Germany is very different to that in today's Korea, which is still divided. For example, there were close contacts between families, friends and church communities in East and West Germany throughout all the years of the division. This means that our experiences in Germany only apply to a certain extent to your country.

And finally, the fall of the Berlin Wall took people by surprise in both East and West Germany. But it was certainly crucial for the success of reunification that the East Germans themselves wanted to gain freedom, that very many people had the courage to stand up for this desire, and that they were able to achieve it thanks to the favourable overall circumstances.

The appeal of the buoyant and successful democracy in West Germany was a particular motivation, as well as the basis for their courage and their desire for freedom and democracy. The Federal Government's long-standing persistent and patient efforts to open doors also played a role in our successful reunification. Within a very short space of time, the governments in East and West Germany together with our European partner countries, the United States and what was then the Soviet Union transformed the increasingly strong

feeling among the population of being “ein Volk” – one people – into policies, treaties and constitutional and democratic paths – an abiding historic achievement by them all.

5. ***Unlike the time of Germany's division and subsequent reunification, no country has a decisive influence on the Korean question – not the United States, China or Russia. However, their influence and commitment are needed to reach a solution. In your view, how should these countries and their different interests be included?***

As I pointed out, it is difficult to compare the current situation on the Korean Peninsula with the division of Germany – and this also applies to the foreign policy dimension. We just spoke about *Ostpolitik*. It and the CSCE process paved the way for the subsequent peaceful transformation. The foundations for reunification were thus paved as early as the 1970s by building confidence and conducting dialogue. However, the crucial impetus for German reunification had to come from both German states themselves. Some of the partner countries in the Two plus Four process and some of Germany's neighbours were extremely sceptical about German reunification. Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, it was a very difficult task to create the foreign policy parameters for German reunification. But Germany would certainly be very happy to share its experiences of these matters with Korea. By the way, the advisory body for foreign-policy aspects of reunification, which was set up by our foreign ministers, will meet during my visit. I will speak with the committee members during my time here.

6. ***As regards peace on the Korean Peninsula and possible reunification, it is very important to bring both North Korea and the international community to the table. What role could the EU, especially Germany, play in this process?***

In the first instance, the international talks mechanisms, such as the Six-Party Talks, are particularly important here. We have always lobbied all participants to continue these talks. Both the EU and Germany are currently conducting a critical dialogue with North Korea. We are under no illusions – and that also goes for the nuclear question. Nevertheless, we believe that dialogue at various levels can help to gradually open channels of communication and to create fundamental trust. Germany can continue to play a constructive role in this, as has been particularly evident since we established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 2001. We regard in-depth discussion as a better option than confrontation reinforced by a lack of communication. We would welcome greater willingness on North Korea's part to engage in such a dialogue.