

Written interview by the Federal President with the Chinese magazine *Caixin* on the occasion of his state visit to China from 20 to 24 March 2016.

1. *You are paying a four day state visit to China. What is the rationale of your visit to China? What are the highlights of your visit and who are you going to meet with?*

First, I have to say that I am coming to your country brimming with curiosity and interest. My visit will take me to Beijing, Shanghai and the old capital Xi'an – three cities which reflect China's political and economic focus, its chequered history and its rich culture and will thus leave me with particularly deep impressions of my first trip to China.

The main aim of my visit is to foster exchange and understanding between China and Germany. I will meet with the Chinese leadership, with academics, culture professionals, entrepreneurs and students. We are aware that we do not share the same views on certain political issues. But we are willing to discuss these issues in a spirit of mutual respect.

I am looking forward to experiencing your fascinating country and to intensive encounters and conversations with your citizens.

2. *State visits typically aim to foster and deepen bilateral relations. How would you describe the state of Sino-German relations?*

Relations between China and Germany are multifaceted and intensive. We engage in in-depth discussion on a wide range of issues: politics, business, technical and social innovation, education and culture. We talk about the things that unite us, but also about the issues that continue to divide us. For example, we continue to pursue our dialogue on human rights or the rule of law – despite differences of opinion. However, relations between China and Germany go beyond this bilateral level. Our countries are linked by a comprehensive strategic partnership. Taking this seriously requires us to join forces in working to achieve a world free from war and violent conflict; a world in which people can live in security and free from poverty and repression; a world whose natural living environment we want to preserve for the future of our children. In recent years China and Germany have jointly assumed responsibility on many difficult global issues, for example, in resolving the problem of Iran's nuclear programme, in the search for a political solution to the Syria conflict, in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and at the Climate Change Conference.

We cooperate very well in the field of business: Many German enterprises produce in China, others export to China, Germany is a major importer of Chinese goods and is becoming an increasingly important location for Chinese foreign investment. We are becoming more and more interconnected, which requires us to build on our mutual trust. That is why we are eager to see this mutual trust increase further. My visit is also designed to encourage civil-society relations to keep up with economic and political relations. We need trade not only in goods, but also in ideas. To this end I am particularly interested in promoting exchange among young people and students further.

3. *This will be your first visit to China as Federal President. However, you have already been to East Asia. Last year you paid a visit to South Korea. Your visit was described by media as a way to push the peaceful development on the Korean Peninsula. The tensions on the Korean Peninsula have recently increased. What do you think of the status quo of the North Korea issue? Can Germany share with the Korean Peninsula any experience in terms of peaceful reunion?*

During my visit to Korea in October I sensed the great interest the Koreans had in German reunification. I was particularly moved by my meeting with young refugees from North Korea. However, I also spoke to the German-Korean Advisory Group, which is endeavouring to learn lessons from German reunification which could be used in the Korean context. This group is one of the platforms in which we share with the South Koreans our experiences of a country divided over several decades. An important element in the process of German reunification was, for example, the existence of a common security forum – the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, CSCE. The CSCE process included the neighbours of West and East Germany as well as the major powers. And within this framework it was then possible to discuss social and economic issues. I would like to see a multilateral, regional security dialogue of this kind successfully established also in East Asia to defuse the considerable tensions in the region, which are currently emanating primarily from North Korea. It is encouraging to see that China, too, recently adopted a clear stance on this in the UN Security Council and that in the past few weeks China has taken a different tone towards North Korea.

4. *While tensions are increasing on the Korean Peninsula, civil war is ongoing in Syria. What do you think of this crisis in Europe's backyard? Is there anything the international community can do to solve this crisis?*

The war in Syria is first and foremost a humanitarian disaster. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives, millions are living as refugees – within Syria itself, in neighbouring countries and coming all the way to us in Central Europe. Without the international community there will be no resolution of the conflict and no relief for the people. That goes for the political peace process itself, involving, among others, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, one of which is China, and a group of states from the region and from Europe, including Germany. Yet it also applies to humanitarian support for the people in Syria and the neighbouring countries. Syria's neighbours have taken in an incredible number of refugees both in absolute terms and particularly in relation to the size of their population.

5. *The crisis in Syria has induced the migration of millions of refugees to Turkey and Europe. Germany has been the main destination of refugees in Europe and welcomed more than 1 million refugees in 2015. What do you think of Germany's way of dealing with the refugee crisis in Europe? Do you think that the crisis has affected Germany? What do you think of the outlook for this year? Is there any way to solve the refugee crisis?*

The refugee crisis is affecting Germany in many areas. Government agencies, but also a very large number of volunteers are making a huge effort to handle the arrival of numerous refugees in a short space of time. And in the coming years we will have to continue to work hard to ensure that as many as possible of those who have come to us in need of protection in recent months and are entitled to stay can earn their living and build a new life in Germany.

At the same time, Germany is working to find a European solution to the refugee crisis. However, the factors that compel people to flee their homes – conflicts and civil war, terrorism, environmental disasters, poverty and hopelessness – are not limited to Europe but affect us all, across the globe. That is why we need to cooperate closely within the European Union, the United Nations and other important organisations to put an end to the war in Syria, other conflicts and civil wars, to fight international terrorism, to implement the decisions of the Climate Change Conference, to tackle poverty and to support key institutions such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

6. The refugee crisis is only one of many challenges Europe is facing right now. There is still a question mark over the Eurozone. The UK is seriously considering leaving the EU. And the situation in Ukraine is far from being stable. Against this backdrop some observers see a bleak future for the EU. What do you think of the future of the EU?

The EU is undeniably facing major challenges at the moment. They are a serious test of the Union's cohesion. But I am confident that at the end of the day, the national governments and the people in the EU will understand that these challenges can only be overcome if Europe stands shoulder to shoulder in solidarity.

As far as the referendum in Britain is concerned, that is a decision they will have to make themselves for their country. I am convinced that the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union is an asset and that all sides stand to lose more than they would gain from its withdrawal. I cannot and do not want to contemplate an EU without the United Kingdom.

7. Another item on the already heavily charged EU agenda – an item closely observed in Beijing - is how the EU is positioning itself with regard to the Market Economy Status of China. Do you think China can get the Market Economy Status by the end of 2016?

As you know, the German Government is in principle open to this proposal. However, it is first and foremost the task of the European Commission to assess whether the necessary criteria are in place. There are evidently still some unresolved questions and valid concerns on the European side. I hope that both sides will reach out to each other. And, regardless of these specialist issues, our goal must be for the economy to improve the livelihoods of all people.