

Written interview in the Japanese daily newspaper, “Yomiuri Shimbun”, to mark the visit by the Federal President to Japan from 13 to 18 November 2016.

**1.) What questions and topics will you bring with you to Japan and what will you discuss with Prime Minister Abe?**

First and foremost, I will arrive in Japan with a great sense of curiosity and anticipation. My first visit to your country will take me to Tokyo, Kyoto and Nagasaki – three places that stand for politics, business, science, culture and a rich history.

I would like to pay tribute to the important and particularly wide-ranging relations between Japan and Germany. Our countries are united today by friendship and close political, economic and societal relations. As liberal democracies, we share fundamental values that shape our view of the world and bind us closely together. The friendship between Germany and Japan also builds a bridge between our continents.

Our countries face similar challenges in foreign and domestic policy. This situation and our societies’ ability to innovate will play a special role in my talks. We can learn from each other on a whole range of topics, such as dealing with an ageing society, the social impact of the Digital Revolution, resource scarcity and global issues like climate protection. We share a commitment to international law as a key feature of our foreign policy and a source of credibility, including in what are sometimes difficult regional issues. As globally interconnected leading economies, Germany and Japan have a particular interest in preserving the order based on international law – an order that is under threat at times – and in strengthening this order for the future. Above all, this involves democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

**2.) Shinzō Abe has made some changes in Japanese politics. There are heated discussions on an amendment to the Constitution of Japan that will allow the Japanese military to be deployed abroad. You have also called for greater courage as regards a more active German foreign policy – including the use of military means, if need be. What do you think of Prime Minister Abe’s idea?**

Japan and Germany are now a force for peace and enjoy special trust worldwide. This is very different to how things were 80 years ago. I can see clearly how much the security policy situation is changing in East Asia. I would like to discuss this development and Japan’s view of the new challenges with Prime Minister Abe. We will also discuss current developments in Europe and international crisis scenarios.

In view of the changed global situation, Germany and Japan are currently experiencing a phase in which their foreign and security policy roles are being redefined in the political sphere and society. It seems to me that people in our two countries are increasingly realising that even more active international involvement, firmly rooted in international institutions, is

in our own interest. What exact form this involvement can and should take will be decided at the end of the debates in the political sphere and society.

**3.) You will also meet the Emperor of Japan. A few months ago, the Tennō announced his intention to abdicate. What do you think of this plan? What will you discuss with him?**

I am very much looking forward to meeting the Japanese Emperor, Empress and Crown Prince. I kindly ask you to understand that I do not wish to comment on the Tennō's thoughts.

**4.) German foreign policy is now active on many fronts, and does not always take a back seat. Is that what you had in mind in Munich in 2014?**

In the debate on Germany's foreign policy role, it is of particular importance to me as Federal President to spark a discussion in order to raise acceptance for the idea that Germany should play a role earlier, more tangibly and more decisively and to support the Federal Government's active, de-escalating and mediating foreign policy.

Since German reunification, Germany has increasingly become a guarantor, rather than merely a beneficiary, of international security and order. This can be seen in Ukraine in particular. Since the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the start of the war in eastern Ukraine, Germany and France have been working actively and tirelessly to resolve the conflict.

**5.) Should Germany take on a leading role internationally and how can it do so without losing sight of its own past and coming into conflict with its partners?**

Following the betrayal of all civilised values that was National Socialism and the Holocaust, Germany has gone from being an ostracised outsider to a respected member of the international community in the decades since the Second World War. We have a successful economy and a stable democracy with firmly rooted rule-of-law values. As a result, we have a responsibility to demonstrate greater commitment to preserving peace and freedom in the world.

A great many of our international partners encourage us – indeed, call on us – to take on a leadership role. This is not a role for which German policymakers yearned. But as Germany became a very stable country for the above-mentioned reasons and at the same time there is instability in many regions of the world, a lot of countries expect us to get more involved and take on greater responsibility. I also see it that way. But, again, the fact is that what we have achieved was only possible by working closely with our partners in the European Union and the transatlantic alliance. It will always be our aim to strengthen this cohesion and to work together for greater peace and security in the world. Of course, there can be differences of opinion and even conflicts over this. But the important thing is to overcome them as partners.

**6.) The euro crisis, the refugee crisis and Brexit – the challenges in Europe have grown in recent years and could put the continent to a serious test. What threats do you see to Europe and what tasks arise from them?**

Europe repeatedly faced particular difficulties during its history and succeeded in overcoming them. This means that the individual challenges of today are not so much the problem, even if the current situation is a special one. The greatest danger is the growing strength of Euro-sceptic, mainly populist political movements, which discredit and oppose the European Union and its fundamental values. These movements fuel resentments, make use of nationalist ideas and pretend that the problems of our time can be solved easily.

At the same time, many people are genuinely unsettled. There is also legitimate criticism of the European Union and a crisis of trust as regards European institutions as a result. Those in positions of political responsibility, as well as societies as a whole, must address these issues seriously. We should always remember that the European Union has brought us peace, stability and prosperity for decades. By the way, I firmly believe that the United Kingdom's forthcoming exit from the European Union – as much as I, along with the majority of my fellow Germans, regret this decision – is not the beginning of the end of the Union, but rather the start of new efforts to defend the European Union and its values.

**7.) All over Europe, we are witnessing new right-wing populist tendencies. And in Germany, too, these have already become established in the form of PEGIDA and the AfD, while their proponents have been elected to Land parliaments. At the same time, the number of crimes motivated by right-wing extremism has grown significantly. What dangers do you see and what needs to be done to combat them?**

Renationalisation trends can be seen worldwide. Many people are frightened by the speed and vehemence of globalisation, among other things, and they believe – consciously or unconsciously – that a return to the nation will bring about controllability and predictability. Populist nationalist movements play on these fears, and this makes things easier for them at times.

Fundamentally, changes can generate fears and worries in people. In Germany, this was heightened by the large number of refugees last year and all of the challenges associated with this. Those in positions of political responsibility must take the fears and worries seriously. However, a clear line must be drawn where protest becomes blind hatred or even descends into violence.

**8.) You have decided not to run again for the office of Federal President. You served your term with great commitment and personal dedication. What was your most momentous experience in this period? And what was the most important topic?**

With regard to foreign policy, it was a particularly moving experience for me that Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands invited me to give a speech in her country on Liberation Day. This meant that for the first time, a German President could experience on an important national

day how bitter animosity had developed into amicable relations. In terms of domestic policy, the most important thing was that I had a chance to experience the strength and diversity of civil society in a very intensive way. There is a stable network of people who do voluntary work in Germany – people who lend a friendly face to the community. Unfortunately, the media rarely reports on how strong this network of dedicated volunteers is or on what a stabilising effect it has.

**9.) Are you happy with the result of the presidential election in the United States? What would you like to wish the new President?**

In a democracy, voters decide on the result of an election, and we must respect this decision. I think this presidential election campaign in the United States was extremely unsettling: facts and truths were often no longer important, while the personal attacks were relentless and of an unprecedented harshness. However, I firmly believe that democracy in the United States, the system of checks and balances and of limited power, is so firmly rooted that it will also withstand this election result. Like his predecessor, the new President will take on vast responsibility, as the United States remains the world's leading nation because of its political, economic and military strength. My hope for Mr Trump is that he will face up to this responsibility prudently.