

Interview with Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Korean daily “Chosun Ilbo” on the occasion of his visit to South Korea from 7 to 11 February 2018

1. *Your Excellency, this is your first visit to Korea and your first Olympic opening ceremony since your inauguration last year. Welcome to Pyeongchang, Korea! Please could you tell us a little about your visit.*

I have always enjoyed visiting South Korea, one of our most important partners in Asia. We have a great deal in common. South Korea and Germany are highly developed democracies and highly advanced economies. We share many challenges, and as medium powers we look to each other for ideas and solutions for the world of tomorrow. We also share a strong interest in a rules-based international order. But that’s not all. Each time I visit South Korea, I sense the deep friendship and respect many Koreans have for my country.

President Moon was one of my first visitors after I became Federal President. We had an excellent discussion in Berlin and he invited my wife and me to visit South Korea. I was delighted to accept his kind invitation to your country and to the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang. I look forward to seeing our German athletes compete for medals. I wish the hosts and the Korean team every success and hope we will all have enjoyable and peaceful Olympics.

2. *Your Excellency, the nuclear crisis seems to have been suspended with North Korea’s participation in the Winter Olympic Games. But there is also scepticism that North Korea will resume threatening the world by launching ICBM missiles and conducting nuclear tests. Germany maintains diplomatic relations with both South and North Korea. And I understand you have a deep knowledge of and interest in the Korean Peninsula because you served as Foreign Minister for a long time. Have you any advice for North Korea?*

I have been following the situation on the Korean Peninsula for a long time. I know that many people hope that Germany, whose decades-long division ended peacefully in 1989-1990, can give advice to the Koreans. But we should be very careful with historical analogies. Above all, German reunification showed that the future is open and unpredictable. The Wall that divided my country seemed as if it would last forever – and yet out of the blue, it vanished. That shows there is reason to hope. However, the current situation in Korea is very different to our own experience of almost 30 years ago. East Germany never posed a threat to its neighbours in the way North Korea does today. Furthermore, the foreign and security policy environment was completely different during the

division of Europe. And frankly, East and West Germany were never as divided politically and socially as North and South Korea are today.

That is why I believe the Olympic Games provide a great opportunity for dialogue between South and North Korea. The two countries should continue, broaden and deepen this dialogue after the Games. At the same time, no one should harbour any illusions. Unless it feels the impact of strict sanctions imposed by all its neighbours, North Korea will not even think about negotiating seriously on its nuclear programme. North Korea must understand that first and foremost it needs to halt its missile tests. Only in this way can the current tensions be eased.

3. *Your Excellency, South Korea currently seems to be stuck in some complicated situations. The United States – a core ally for South Korea – wants to tighten sanctions against North Korea and accelerate military cooperation. The US also needs trilateral cooperation between South Korea, Japan and the US on military and security issues. In contrast, China, which is keeping a close eye on US activities in the Asia-Pacific region, remains strongly opposed to military cooperation and readiness against threats from North Korea. China is making use of its status as the largest market for the South Korean economy to force South Korea to follow its stance. Russia also stands with China. North Korea may demand some economic rewards, such as the reopening of the industrial complex and the resumption of package tours, after the Olympic Games. North Korea is continuing to threaten South Korea by refusing to engage in talks about denuclearisation. It also keeps insisting that nuclear issues are not a subject for talks between North and South Korea. What should South Korea do in these situations? Could you advise us?*

Relations and interests are particularly complex in your region. And there is clearly no immediate solution to the extreme political and indeed military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The division of Germany was also characterised by mutually exclusive and incompatible interests and positions among the big players. However, my impression is that people are increasingly realising that the international community must stand united if it wants to counteract the massive violations of fundamental international rules by regimes such as North Korea in an effective way. In other words, we cannot make any meaningful progress on the North Korea conflict without the United States, South Korea, Japan, Russia and China. The great diplomatic challenge is to persuade these powers to join forces on furthering this common interest.

4. *Your Excellency, Mr President, you served as Foreign Minister in Chancellor Angela Merkel's Cabinet. Now you are Head of State. It seems to be difficult to form a grand coalition among the CDU-CSU and SPD. What is the Federal President's role in such a political deadlock? You may*

have met with Chancellor Merkel or SPD leader Martin Schulz. If so, what did you tell them? Did you meet together or separately?

It is true that since the general election on 24 September 2017, it is taking longer to form a government than was usually the case in Germany in the past 70 years. Since the election, there have been talks on various possible ways of forming a coalition government. As Federal President, my task is to follow this process closely, while ensuring our constitution is upheld and taking action if there is any doubt. It is both good and reassuring that the authors of our Basic Law – Germany's constitution – also thought of legal provisions and measures in cases of difficult situations, particularly as regards ensuring that the institutions, including the Federal President, work together effectively.

5. *Your Excellency, Korea and Japan are close neighbours. But Korea has several conflicts with Japan such as historical issues and territorial conflict. How could South Korea and Japan solve complex and difficult issues such as comfort women and the question of whether Japan should have a regular military?*

As President of the Federal Republic of Germany, I am unable to give any advice to other countries that share a difficult history marked by violence and war. Following the darkest chapters of its history and the untold suffering it unleashed on many of its neighbours and millions of people during the 20th century, my own country was very fortunate to experience the joy of reconciliation. We now also enjoy close and friendly relations with countries that were victims of German aggression. Willingness and determination on both sides were crucial in bringing about this miraculous reconciliation. Allow me to mention just one particularly impressive example. In a letter to their German counterparts in 1965 – just 20 years after the end of the Second World War, which Germany waged with particular brutality against Poland – the Polish bishops wrote: “We reach out our hands to you (...), forgive and ask for forgiveness.” This letter expressed tremendous courage and unparalleled generosity. To this day, we Germans endeavour to do justice to this generosity and to be a good neighbour to Poland.

6. *Your Excellency, recently we've seen many headlines about “Europe in crisis” – a lot of news on Brexit, influxes of immigrants, terror and the rise of far-right political parties in several countries. The stunning results achieved by the AfD at the last general German election are considered a representative case. Germany has also suffered terrible terror attacks and immigrant conflicts.*

What do political leaders need to do to solve such problems in Europe? How do you see the future of Europe and the EU?

Europe has been going through a difficult phase for some time, with several crises arising one after the other and the rise of anti-European political groups. However, I have no time for alarmism. By the way, this debate is not limited to Europe, but is being conducted in many countries around the world. We are seeing the emergence of movements in our modern societies that are opposed to the enormous changes and upheavals resulting from globalisation and the spread of digital technology. Quite a number of people are reacting with a desire for isolation and a retreat to the national level, which explains the success of political groups that offer precisely that supposed solution. However, this is certainly the wrong answer to the challenges of our time. Germany views European integration as the only successful answer to its history and geography. I am certain that this will be reflected in the conduct of the future German Government.