Interview - Hans Carl von Werthern

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Dr Hans Carl von Werthern, German Ambassador to Japan since March 2014, was born in 1953. He is married with three daughters. He holds a diploma and PhD in Economics from Mainz University and an MA in International Relations from King's College, London. He entered the German Foreign Office in 1984 and has had postings to Hanoi (Vietnam, 1987-1990), Brussels (NATO, 1990-1992), Asunción (Paraguay, 1994-1997) and Beijing (China, 2007-2010). He was also seconded to the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, Hamburg (1986-1987), to the Liberal Party Group in the German National Parliament as European Policy Adviser (2000-2002) and to the Royal College of Defence Studies, London (2003). In the Foreign Office he served as Deputy Head of the Training Division for Diplomats (1992-1994), as Deputy Director for Western Europe (1997-2000), as Head of Task Force "Germany in Japan 2005/2006" (2004-2005), as East Asia Director (2005-2007), as Deputy Director General in charge of Personnel (2010-2011) and, before coming to Japan, as Director General Central Services (2011-2014).

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in your field of work?

For me, the most exciting debate in international politics centres around the following question: Do we succeed in preserving our rules based on international order and resting on the rule of law, the respect for human rights, democracy, open markets, international cooperation and peaceful conflict settlement? Or do we succumb to populist tendencies that want to close markets, pull out of international agreements, and rely on the presumed strength of their own country. The outcome of this debate has direct implications on our future and that of our children and grandchildren. I profoundly believe that the common challenges of our time – climate change, energy security, international terrorism, fighting poverty and diseases, and many more – can only be met by cooperation and working out compromises between sometimes wildly differing opinions and interests. This is complicated, cumbersome, often frustrating, and it takes time. But seemingly, easy answers to complex problems, as offered by the populists from the right or the left, have never led us anywhere.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I entered the German Foreign Service in 1984, the world was characterised by the Cold War, and it was basically divided between the West dominated by the United States and the East dominated by the Soviet Union. Germany was divided, and the Berlin Wall did not only split the city in two, it was also the symbol of a deeply dividing mistrust and adversity between the two systems. It was a dangerous situation, but things were more or less laid out clearly: we in the West, including Japan, considered ourselves to be in the right and the other side to be in the wrong.

In 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell – and in the years to follow when Germany and Europe were reunited – we were overjoyed, but we also soon found out that things had become much more complicated. For example, instead of one Soviet Union, we had to deal with 15 individual countries about whom we knew very little. In spite of that we thought that democracy, the market economy and prosperity would be realised everywhere almost automatically – Francis Fukuyama even wrote about the "End of History." Today, we have learnt the hard way that liberal democracies do not stay liberal and democratic all by themselves. We have to work hard for peace, for the rule of law, and for freedom of expression, both in our own countries and internationally.

What motivated you to work for the Foreign Federal Office of Germany? What does the role involve, and could you share any of the best and worst aspects of diplomatic work?

I knew rather early that I wanted to work within some form of international relations and see and live in countries far away from Germany. Having studied economics at university, I first looked for jobs in international companies. But I also knew that earning money and making profit was not on top of the list of my priorities. So, when my application for the Foreign Service was successful, I was extremely happy. I felt that, in my own little way, I could perhaps contribute to peace, international cooperation and mutual understanding between countries. By and large, my hopes have not been disappointed. I had postings to Vietnam, Belgium, Paraguay, Great Britain, China and now, to Japan. The politically most exciting moment, perhaps, was when I witnessed the short speech of the Soviet Ambassador to NATO on 20 December 1991 when he announced that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist 20 minutes before. But I also had a lot of very memorable personal encounters and very inspiring discussions.

The downside of diplomatic life, particularly for the accompanying families, is the constant change and the disruptions every three years when we change posts. One of the most difficult moments was before I was posted to China when our 14-year-old second daughter declared to us that she would not go with us to Beijing, and that she would look for a different family and stay in Berlin. Three years later when she registered for her final exams in the German School Tokyo she wrote: “Three years ago it seemed to me that the worst thing in life that could happen to me was to go to China. Today I know it was the best thing in life that happened to me.” For me, this is a wonderful example that change and disruption are also great chances, perhaps only to be recognised after they have happened.

How have Germany-Japan bilateral relations developed during your time as an ambassador? What are the most important collaborations between Germany and Japan?

In the last five years, we have seen a very positive intensification of the already close relations between our two countries. We have an ever-increasing number of political visits in both directions. This year alone, Chancellor Merkel will have been to Japan twice, first in February for a bilateral visit, then at the end of June for the G20 Summit. Both countries have a lot in common. Also, the economic and business relationship has intensified considerably. There are a lot of profitable projects of cooperation between German and Japanese companies, including on third markets, in particular in Asian countries. I would like to mention especially the cooperation in the fields of science and technology where we have seen a steady increase of cooperation agreements over the last couple of years, dealing with super computers, artificial intelligence, the internet of things, autonomous driving, and so forth.

In February, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledged to strengthen their bilateral relationship. What outcomes and challenges do you expect? What impact will Brexit and Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ approach have on Germany-Japan relations?

As mid-size nations with few natural resources, we both depend on science and technology, on open markets, and on reliability in international relations. It is quite obvious that in times of rising uncertainty, of increasing populism, but also of tendencies towards isolationism and protectionism, countries like Japan and Germany have to assume more responsibility in the world in order to foster freedom, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, the exchange of ideas, people and of goods, and so forth. And in order to be able to assume this responsibility, we have to work more closely together. Our cooperation is most interesting and fruitful where our answers to similar challenges differ. Germany has decided to abandon nuclear energy, Japan is embracing nuclear energy; Germany is opening its labour market to immigrants, also to mitigate the consequences of demographic change, Japan is much more cautious in that respect (though it has taken initial steps to encourage labour immigration recently); Japan is far advanced in the use of robotics in the health care sector, Germany is rather reticent in this regard. Where our answers differ we can learn from other’s points of view and experiences, where they are the same there is much less to talk about.

Germany, Japan, and other UN countries have called for an overhaul of the UN Security Council. What are they proposing and what actions will Germany and Japan take to achieve this?

Japan and Germany have been engaged together for peace and security for many years, not only in the United Nations. One core element of our close cooperation is advocating the reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC) together with India and Brazil – the so called G4-format. As you know, the UNSC in its present composition mirrors the geopolitical power structures of the world in 1945 when it was founded. These structures have fundamentally changed within the last 70 years and the UNSC is in danger of losing legitimacy and authority. Therefore, a large majority of the Member States of the UN favors its reform. A variety of concepts have been proposed but because of profound differences of opinion none of these concepts have been put to a vote.

Japan and Germany, in the framework of the reform suggested by G4, propose to create new seats in the Security Council, both permanent and non-permanent. I have to admit that it will not be easy to lead the G4 proposal to success. In order to enlarge the Security Council, the UN Charter has to be changed. A proposal for amending the Charter has to be adopted by two thirds in the General Assembly and then ratified in two thirds of the Member States, including the five permanent members of the Security Council. These are high hurdles. But Germany and Japan will continue to work for the reform. The ultimate aim is to secure the multilateral system which both of us value highly.

How do German and Japanese responses to the events of WWII compare? Are there lessons to be learned from either state?

The atrocities committed by Germany in the Holocaust and during the Second World War are incomparable. In spite of that, a number of Germany's former adversaries, first and foremost France, extended their hands in friendship and reconciliation after the war. Franco-German reconciliation was the nucleus of the European integration which has resulted in today's European Union. Germany, on the other hand, in a long and painful process that is still continuing, has openly confronted its past and tried to deal with it, also in a dialogue with its neighbours.

Japan did not have neighbours who were ready for reconciliation. Also, in contrast to Western Europe, this region did not undergo a process of political and economic integration which fostered policies of reconciliation. Also, other than in the German case where 1945 constituted a clear cut and new beginning, Japan experienced a certain continuity. Last but not least, the experience of the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki may have led to a perception of the Japanese people of being victims rather than perpetrators of the war.

Looking at these differences I don't think there are lessons to be learnt, much less to be taught. Each country has to find its own ways to handle conflicts and historical burdens. No answer is a priori better than another, and a solution that fits one country does not necessarily or even usually fit any other. Having said that, it is my deep conviction that conflicts can only be solved in a sustainable way if the conflicting parties succeed in looking at the conflict through the eyes of the other party. War memories are never complete without including the memories of the victims. And I don't see any reason why reconciliation such as that between the former "arch enemies" France and Germany should not be possible in East Asia one day.

After Fukushima, Germany decided to shut down all nuclear power plants by 2022. What have been the consequences for Germany?

The nuclear disaster in Fukushima had immediate and widespread consequences for energy policy in Germany. It caused an outcry in the general public with hundreds of thousands of citizens demonstrating against nuclear power in the weeks following the disaster because it confirmed a latent and long-lasting fear since the disaster in Chernobyl in 1986 that the risks of nuclear power cannot ultimately be controlled. Ever since, Germany has increased its commitment to implement the *Energiewende* (energy transition). This term stands for a long-term strategy for the decarbonisation of the industry, promotion of renewable energy and increasing energy efficiency. The *Energiewende* has led to fundamental consequences for the industry, research and society. With the announcement of the phase out of coal until 2038, a next step has been taken toward the target to make renewable energy sources the main pillar of the electricity supply.

All these paradigm shifts bring challenges with them, but they also generate new industries, business models, and innovation. International cooperation in this is essential. Germany and Japan are cooperating on all levels –

multilaterally, nationally and locally. The G20 meetings under the Japanese presidency will hopefully contribute to further intensify the cooperation.

What is the most important advice that you would give to aspiring diplomats and young scholars of international relations?

Beyond stating the obvious – be eager to learn, work hard, study foreign languages, go abroad – I would like to add: foster your hobbies, keep an interest in matters not directly related to your field of study or work, take care of your family and your friends.