Building Bridges

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In early November, the German-Korean forum convened in Busan, South Korea, offering a platform for policymakers and influential figures from both nations to engage in discussions shaping their bilateral relations. What distinguishes the German-Korean forum is the addition of a "Junior Forum." Here, young people from both countries come together and mirror the activities of the senior forum attendees. They gather in dedicated working groups to formulate policy recommendations spanning various contemporary political challenges and forward these to decision-makers in both countries. This year, these issues ranged from regulating AI and energy security to addressing problems associated with demographic changes.

Introductory Seminar in Seoul

Stars aligned and I was fortunate to join this year's Junior Forum, along with 24 other participants. Before our trip to Busan, we took part in an introductory seminar that shed light on the close relations between Germany and South Korea. We engaged in discussions about South Korea's international role, with Lee Sang-min, Chairperson of the Korean-German parliamentary group, sharing a perspective of South Korea as a relatively modest global player, a view later reinforced by students we encountered during a seminar by the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation. Despite South Korea's robust military, strong economy, and strategic efforts to boost its international influence, it almost seemed to me as if Koreans underestimated what their country is capable of.

In addition to our meeting with the Korean-German parliamentary group, we engaged with representatives of the German-Korean parliamentary group, who had travelled to South Korea for this year's Senior Forum. Heike Baehrens, Chairperson, emphasized the importance of both Germany and Korea promoting a rules-based international order, while Vice Chair Thomas Röwekamp stressed Germany's responsibility to advance specific values on the global stage. Our introductory seminar was complemented by a visit to the inner-Korean border and a reception hosted by the German Ambassador to South Korea, Geord Schmidt. During this event, we discussed German-Korean relations from political and economic standpoints and explored deeper political dynamics in the whole of Northeast Asia.

XI. German-Korean Junior Forum in Busan

After a week full of insights into German-Korean relations, it was time to head to Busan for the main part of this trip. On November 2nd, we gathered in our working groups, and my group developed policy recommendations on the Ukraine War and the emerging world order.

After extensive and in part controversial discussions, we arrived at a number of conclusions. We all agreed on the fact that both Germany and South Korea have a certain responsibility in the world and should use their influence to promote global stability, democracy and international cooperation. In particular, we called on both countries to deepen relations with emerging countries such as India or Indonesia in order to secure their influence in the long term. To meet this goal, we envisioned a Talk-Trade-Exchange approach, involving increased high-level political visits, expanded trade ties and enhanced people-to-people exchange, mainly in the form of scholarships for student exchange and through a youth ambassador programme. These measures contribute to an elevated cross-cultural understanding and foster interdependence among societies, thus contributing to peaceful and positive relations.

The next day, I presented our recommendations to the members of the Senior Forum. While the subsequent farewell lunch provided an opportunity for further discussions, all participants of the Junior Forum were honoured by the warm words of the Forum's Co-Chair Martin Dulig, Saxon State Minister of Economy, Labor and Traffic, who was very interested in the views that we, the participants in the Junior Forum, have shared on the various political issues subject of our discussions.

I was honoured to take part in this year's German-Korean Junior Forum, and cherished the opportunity to exchange views with both the German and the Korean participants. I am sure that through the forum, we have gained a better understanding of how the other side perceives pressing political issues, and I am sure that initiatives like this contribute to closer relations between both countries in the future. Considering the success of the German-Korean Junior Forum, other countries, too, should explore similar programmes.

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