

Increased Self-Awareness for the Defenders of Democracy

In the Far East, German President Joachim Gauck advocates for Japan and Germany to trust more in their own strengths – especially now, as America is reducing its engagement in global affairs.

By Matthias Nass, November/December 2016

It was a kind of farewell trip. Joachim Gauck visited Japan three weeks ago – just as the leaders of the grand coalition in Berlin nominated Frank-Walter Steinmeier as their candidate for the next President of Germany.

Gauck had never been to Japan. He went on this "special journey," as he called it, expectantly and curiously; probably the last major tour of his term. Japan is a foreign culture and yet similar to Germany in many ways; a "distant companion", as Gauck said, citing the title of an exhibition on German-Japanese relations.

Japan is far, and at the same time, close enough to ask the three questions that have concerned the German President for a long time: How do we deal with our past? How can the democracies exist in a "competition of ideas" with authoritarian states? How do we defend ourselves if the "great ally" America actually withdraws from world politics?

The Federal President raised these questions in conversations with intellectuals in Tokyo, with young researchers and artists in Kyoto, and with a survivor of the atomic bombing in Nagasaki.

Prior to his trip, the government in Tokyo had feared that Gauck, like other German politicians before him, would reproach Japan for not declaring war guilt clearly enough; or that he would recommend Germany as a model for dealing with the past and for reconciling with neighbors.

The President did not make this mistake. To be sure, he did say that he was "an opponent of forgetting". But above all, during a speech at Waseda University in Tokyo, he emphasized "what an amazing road to the present day" both countries had succeeded in following.

More than the past, Gauck dealt with his second subject, the new system debate: "Liberalism stands against illiberalism, democracy against autocracy." Once again, he emphasized the German-Japanese "partnership of values", which must prove itself when engaging with countries like Russia and China.

He has little hope for change in these two countries. According to him, Russia is economically weak and has "no real future vision", which is why Putin plays the "national identity card". In China, the ruling ideology can only assert itself because it is connected with a "robbery capitalism in the Manchester style".

But the real emphasis on this journey was Gauck's third theme: Japan and Germany, he is convinced, are solid democracies who could rely more on their own strength for security and defense, especially at a time when America is reducing its commitment to global politics. "Our history must not be a reason for inaction."

Gauck thus circled back to his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2014. Since then his doubt about America seems to have grown. "It is obvious," he replied to the question of a student, "that we cannot sit there trembling and ask, what can we do without

America?" On the contrary, it is necessary "that our countries grow the confidence to defend ourselves where others do not stand for us".

But through the listener's head came the thought: Revulsion against Donald Trump's America should not lead to an overestimation of our capabilities. Both Germany and Japan are miles away from being able to do without the protection of the United States. Gauck, who knows this, did not want to be misunderstood: "We are not a world power," he said, with a view to Germany.

But his belief in Germany's solid democracy is great, almost unshakable. After all, he concedes, she is "work in progress" – a favorite word on this journey; democracy must remain a "learning system".

There is no question that he trusts both the Germans and the Japanese to be smart enough to preserve this democracy and, if necessary, to defend it. The doubt about the United States, however, gnaws at him. Of course it will not work without America, that is clear. But the Japanese and Germans can have a little more trust in their own capabilities.

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a conservative nationalist who wants to strip the fetters of the pacifist post-war constitution, undoubtedly has this confidence. He wants a militarily stronger Japan. But the nationalist Abe is at the same time a realist. Three days after Gauck's visit, he traveled to New York to meet Donald Trump, the first Western head of government to do so. Possibly because he correctly assesses the powers of his country.

Matthias Nass accompanied President Gauck on his trip as the Co-Chair of the German-Japanese Forum.

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was originally published in ZEIT Online. The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.