

91st “Liebesmahl” Dinner

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Check against delivery!

The recent developments in Japan

When one thinks of East Asia these days, one thinks first and foremost of Japan; of the recent earthquake and its devastating consequences. Every day brings terrible new images. One image conveyed the scale of this tragedy to me in a very personal way. It was an image of Onagawa, a town in northern Japan. I knew this town very well. I was often there, during the four years that I worked in Japan and lived there with my family. My memory of Onagawa is of a picturesque coastal town, a town rich in art and culture. The picture I saw in a newspaper a few days ago was of a town in ruins.

My family and I are deeply moved by images such as these. And, as a friend of Japan, I would like to express my deep sympathies. I am overcome with great sadness in the face of the tragedy in your country. I would also like to express sympathy on behalf of all members of the Asia-Pacific Committee. Our thoughts are with the Japanese people, particularly those directly affected by this disaster, their families and friends, the Japanese government, and our Japanese business partners. Be assured of our help and support, both during the efforts to overcome this catastrophe and during the reconstruction that lies ahead. We believe in Japan – in the courage and discipline, the determination and spirit of its people. We stand by their side.

The Model of the Honorable Merchant

Providing help during a crisis like this is not only a business necessity; it is part of our responsibility as business leaders. In Japan, one would say that it's a matter of integrity and honor. This is a word that resonates strongly here in the chambers of Germany's oldest stock exchange. After all, it was the "Assembly of the "Honorable Merchants of Hamburg" that seized the initiative to create this stock exchange.

From the earliest days onward, the model of the Honorable Merchant shaped the international trade that took place in these rooms. Through trade, this model traveled around the world. And today, it has lost none of its relevance.

Quite the opposite: At a time when national economies around the world are inseparably linked; when the consequences of the economic crisis can only be tackled together; when the mature economies of Europe and the U.S. are seeking new ways to stimulate growth – and growth drivers in China, India, Japan, Korea or ASEAN nations need experienced, innovative partners; at a time, when we must join forces to protect the environment; when we are working to modernize our cities and industries in a sustainable way; when we seek to redefine the contract between generations. At a time like this, we need the model of the Honorable Merchant: A model that strengthens trust and calls for responsibility; a model that strives for long-term success, not just short-term gains; a model that promotes cosmopolitanism and partnership; a model that urges us to be pioneers, to travel new paths, develop innovations and invest in the future.

Today, in the age of sustainability, this model and its underlying values are more important than ever: They are the compass that guides our entrepreneurial activity all over the world.

Three anchors of the Asia-Pacific Committee

This compass also guides the members of the Asia-Pacific Committee. Three anchors guide our activities: sustainability, innovation, and partnership. This is a far-sighted vision for which I am indebted to my two predecessors in this office.

Sustainability

Sustainability – for us at the Asia-Pacific Committee, this means acting responsibly toward the environment, the economy and society. We want to protect the environment and the climate, and we want to develop innovations that enable us to use scarce resources more efficiently. At the same time, we want to enhance the competitiveness of our businesses and of our countries. And we want to contribute to the quality of life, to prosperity and to social progress, wherever we do business.

For us, “progress” means shaping the continuous changes taking place in the economy and society – with our skills; with the knowledge we've gained from experience; and with our ability to apply our insights in a responsible way. The prerequisite for this is openness. Only then can we realize true progress, for people and for our world.

International trade and cooperation across borders and cultures can also support solidarity among nations and encourage national economies to grow together.

Growing together and prospering in the long term – that is our goal!

Innovation

We can achieve these goals of sustainability. In order to do so, above all we need innovations! For example in cities. Today, cities are home to more than half the world's population. They are our economic centers. Yet they are also responsible for approximately three quarters of greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, our future will be decided in cities. The theme of last year's EXPO in Shanghai expressed it very concisely: Better City, Better Life.

That's why we should strengthen our innovation power by investing in the future – in education and training, in research and development, and in pioneering projects. This is not an easy task for us in Europe, in light of tight public budgets. Yet such investments pay for themselves twice over: they enhance the competitiveness of communities while at the same time lowering the demand for resources, thus saving money.

In Germany, we've been aware of this for years. Our excellent reputation as the “Land of Ideas” is in large part based on German industry's leading position in green technologies. This year, Hamburg – the 2011 European Green Capital – is the best example of this.

Partnership

This leadership has made our companies desirable partners. German companies are very well-renowned in Asia. And the stronger the partnerships, the more successful the business.

This realization is nothing new for members of the German Asia-Pacific Business Association. For 111 years, it has been a "Pioneer in Partnership." A pioneer who breaks new ground, explores new business opportunities, establishes new contacts, and shares experiences and interests; for example, through "trusted delegates," which the German Asia-Pacific Business Association sent out as early as 1901.

A partner who values the diversity of cultures, recognizes local needs, encourages dialogue, and thereby builds a foundation of trust for stable partnerships; for example, founding schools as part of this cultural engagement. Incidentally, Tongji University emerged from one of these school foundations. A pioneer upon whose excellent work the Asia Pacific Business Association gratefully builds.

Partnership and dialogue pave the way to grow together

On this solid foundation laid by German Asia-Pacific Business Association, the Asia-Pacific Committee can openly address sensitive issues – for example, the protection of intellectual property, the conditions for technology transfer, the definition of international standards and certification, the management of scarce resources, the financing of exports, or the subsidization of large-scale projects. The Asia-Pacific Committee speaks out on difficult issues like these, clearly and directly.

However, we do not use these issues to form lines of battle. Our experience demonstrates that it is not confrontation but dialogue that helps to deepen a partnership, and helps to set the course for growing together. What occasion could be better suited to take part in this dialogue than the renowned "Liebesmahl" dinner of the German Asia-Pacific Business Association?