

At the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference in Australia

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Thank you very much for your warm welcome – and thank you for the kind invitation to speak to you today! I am very happy to be here – not least because this visit to Perth is the first time I have set foot on Wallaby soil.

To me, being in Australia feels like checking in with a good old "mate" – I hope I've pronounced that correctly – a good mate that I've known for a long time, but one who lives just a little bit further down the road.

So let me start by saying how happy I am about the strong bond that exists between our two countries. My dear Australian friends, on behalf of all my German countrymen and women in this room today: thank you for having us!

Minister Cormann, your initiative for this Asia-Pacific Regional Conference sends a strong signal of partnership and cooperation across the entire Asia-Pacific region – and all the way to Berlin and Munich, to Frankfurt and Hamburg, seven time zones away.

The result is impressive indeed. I'm amazed by today's list of attendees. It is testimony to the importance of this event, and to the hard work of the German-Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It also highlights the successful efforts by the Australia Germany Advisory Group over these past few years. I'm grateful to all those who have invested their time and expertise to make this happen.

I'm delighted that we not only have Prime Minister Turnbull and Foreign Minister Bishop among us today, but also the Governor and the Premier of Western Australia, as well as Minister of State Böhmer from Germany – to name just a few of the many high-ranking dignitaries in this room. What an achievement!

And last but not least, let me say a special Hello to the large crowd of important business people and CEOs who have made the journey here today – from Germany, from all over Australia, and from across the Asia-Pacific. I hope that this Conference is a tremendous success for you, and I wish you all the best for these next two days. You certainly are in the right place, at the right time!

Yesterday, as our airplane was nearing Australia and we caught the first glimpse of the continent, we were amazed: by endless beaches, the deep-blue ocean, a sunny horizon without a single cloud. And one of us, up there, said: ""It looks like fairy tale country!""

And who wouldn't want to live in a fairy tale? I can tell you that German culture certainly has its share of romantic dreams. Our very own Neuschwanstein castle, set against a dramatic Alpine landscape in Bavaria, is the symbol of German romanticism. It attracts 1.3 million visitors a year, many of them from the Asia-Pacific.

And I think it's safe to say that fairy tales are indeed a universal language. They're important to people across the globe, from the Black Forest to the Outback of Australia. And I think that's important – it's important to dream, to imagine what a better world might look like, and to tell a story of how to get there.

But the world we live in is no fairy tale. Even hard-boiled politicians and business people find it challenging to watch the evening news these days:

We see authoritarian rulers walking the world stage with ever increasing confidence – rulers who promise welfare and security, but withhold freedom and democracy.

We see regional powers showing their strength, bullying smaller countries and violating the territorial integrity of their immediate neighbours.

We see rogue dictators threatening to unleash the horror of nuclear war and refusing to engage in meaningful dialogue.

We see armed conflicts and despicable acts of terrorism – not only across the arc of violence that stretches from North Africa to Syria and Iraq, but also in parts of our own regions, in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region.

And on top of all this, we also need to face the consequences of environmental destruction and a changing climate – causing natural disasters, starvation, and mass migration.

Looking at all this, some say: ""Let's pull up the drawbridge;"" ""We must strengthen our defences,"" they say, ""and retreat behind the walls of our castles.""

We can see many examples of this:

When the nation that brought Germany back into the free world, into openness and democracy in 1945, starts withdrawing from established international institutions, removes itself from free trade negotiations, and seeks to impose new barriers on trade.

When the European Union, the most successful project of peace and prosperity my continent has ever seen, loses one of its largest member states.

And when those who question the value of open societies and the importance of dialogue between cultures win an ever increasing share of the electoral vote in liberal democracies.

The King of Bavaria built his famous fairy tale castle of Neuschwanstein for one purpose, and for one purpose only: to withdraw from a hostile world that he simply couldn't face. But you know as well as I do that isolating ourselves will not solve any of these problems. We cannot simply remove ourselves from the world. Not even kings can do that. The story of Ludwig did not end well, as many of you may know. He lost touch for good – paradise was lost and he perished.

I say to you that we should choose a different path. If I can ask one thing of you today, it is this:

Let us not withdraw from the world. Let us not give in to those who say that walls and barriers are the solution. Let us remain strong in our belief in openness and dialogue, and let us spread this message wherever we can! Today I want to urge you, as business leaders, to raise your voices. We need your engagement not only in board meetings and stock exchanges but also in this political debate for an open and peaceful world, and for the international institutions that make such a world possible!

Fortunately, Australians and Germans are natural allies in this endeavour. We share many values and objectives, and for good reasons:

We are both committed to democracy, social cohesion, and the rule of law.

Both our countries are trading hubs, in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, with strong cultural and economic ties to our neighbours.

We are both advocates of open, free, and fair trade, and our economies complement each other well.

We maintain reliable bilateral ties in education, research, and people-to-people exchange.

And we are both determined to keep up our counter-terrorism efforts and to maintain a stable, rules-based international order.

These days, it is increasingly up to countries such as Australia, Germany and other like-minded partners to pick up the slack in international politics. We are called upon to advocate constructive multilateralism and to make sure it continues to prosper. We should be confident in sending our message of cooperation, because it's working! Let me name just two examples:

We successfully adopted the UN Sustainable Development Goals, where for the first time we packaged peace and prosperity, environment and climate protection into one overarching global agenda.

And we've ratified the Paris Climate Agreement, which, despite all the setbacks, the international community will continue to implement this month when we meet – only a few days from now – back in my home country, at the United Nations in Bonn.

We need more of these success stories, and Germany and Australia are at the forefront of the effort: from our bilateral work in the 2+2 format to our cooperation in the World Trade Organization, at the G20, the United Nations, and in regional organisations – and, not least, in our joint effort to conclude a free trade agreement between Australia and the European Union! I advocate trade agreements that defend the principles of free trade but also protect our social and labour standards, as well as our natural resources. Such trade agreements are more than a path to economic growth and prosperity – they can also contribute to a more inclusive, a more peaceful path of globalisation. Free and fair trade cannot guarantee peace and prosperity, but it can bring people together across borders and counteract nationalism – because open trade makes us understand how much we need each other. And when I look in your faces today, I'm confident that the business community will remain a strong ally in spreading this message.

For me and my delegation, this trip to Australia is a long overdue visit to far away friends. Friends who may live halfway around the globe, but who are nevertheless very close to our hearts. One of the things I hope to do on this trip is to learn from Australia's experience. I would like to compare notes on the issues confronting both our countries, as well as our regions in Europe and the Asia-Pacific.

Take the question of immigration, for example, which has become a highly contentious topic in my country, especially over the past two years. More than half a million refugees from war-torn Syria alone have found safety and protection within our borders since the civil war began.

Giving shelter to all these people has been a tremendous challenge for our country, from the Federal Government all the way down to local authorities and civil society. And the real debate about the rules we need for future migration policy has only just begun. I'm looking forward to learning more about the Australian debate on this issue – especially because I know that it hasn't always been an easy topic. For both of our nations, it remains a challenge to reconcile the reality of the world with the limited possibilities of our countries.

I'm happy to say that I'm far from alone in my desire to come here and to learn. In this room today, I'm glad to see many young start-up entrepreneurs from Germany. We've also brought numerous experts on the digital Industrie 4.0 with us. And tomorrow, I'll meet a group of young Germans who are spending time here on a work and travel programme. For them, as for many Germans, Australia is the destination of their dreams!

I've said it before: you're in the right place, at the right time. I can't imagine a better setting to compare notes and views on a rapidly changing architecture of international politics and international markets - and to find common solutions and discuss conditions for ever-closer future cooperation. Over the next two days, you're going to discuss an impressive range of topics: from regional and global trade to the digital revolution and the question of cyber security, from energy and agriculture to education and urban mobility.

I can only say: let's get on with it, all of us – at conferences, in daily business, in our democratic governments, and across our civil societies!

Every step we take to make the world a more inclusive place can be an antidote to the lure of protectionism.

Every debate – even if it's controversial – can bring us closer together.

And even the smallest idea that helps to improve people's lives can give hope to those who are afraid of the future.

The world we live in is no fairy tale. But retreating behind our castle walls won't make it one. Only by engaging with the world as it is can we start to make it a safer, a better place. And that's what I hope you will do here!

Thank you very much and I wish you a successful conference.

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