Interview with the President of the SGC – The first 50 days

Mr Jens Rübbert has been elected President of the Singaporean-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (SGC) in March 2020. Professionally he has been Regional Head for Asia Pacific of the Landesbank Baden-Württemberg (LBBW) here in Singapore since January of 2018. Before that, he worked for Deutsche Bank for 27 years in various positions in many countries – Germany, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Ho Chi Minh City, Beijing - and from 1997 until 2000 even here in Singapore. And now, alongside LBBW, he is the newly elected president of the SGC.

Mr Rübbert has already been very dedicated to Chamber work, having served as Vice-Chairman of the European Chamber of Commerce during his time in China, as well as Chairman of the German Business Association and as Chairman of the European Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam, right before moving to Singapore. He has been a member of the SGC Board since March 2018, and he represents the SGC at the Board of Governors of the EuroCham Singapore.

Mr Rübbert, what led you to accept the position as the President of the Singaporean-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (SGC)?

The network of the German Chambers of Commerce Abroad (AHKs) is a reliable partner for both small and large companies. The numbers speak for themselves: Represented in 140 locations worldwide and with over 50,000 members, they provide a global network of knowledgeable contacts. I find this fascinating and noteworthy, and the SGC is part of this network. Besides, promoting foreign trade and representing German economic interests are objectives I support, and I hope to be able to further contribute to this development.

The SGC is doing a remarkable job in promoting the bilateral trade between Germany and Singapore, so it was a great pleasure for me to accept the position as President of the SGC. We have a strong pool of members and provide a high-quality networking platform. Furthermore, we can assist companies from Germany and from Singapore in developing international business contacts and support them in bringing new innovations to the market. Our members are mainly based in the business hub Singapore but usually cover the whole region of Southeast Asia and in many cases additional countries. To them and to the companies based in Germany we offer a wide range of expertise through various competence centres in the areas of Business development, Trade Policies, Export Financing and Trade Fairs. Our members in Singapore also benefit from a high-quality exchange such as business breakfasts, conferences or seminars and the SGC-Committee meetings where new ideas are discussed, developed, and implemented. As you can see the SGC is truly a competent partner for businesses in Germany and Singapore with a great team as well as many dedicated members volunteering for our business community and I am happy to be part of it.

You are now in this position for about 50 days. The beginning of your term has taken a major turn with the COVID-19 crisis. What are your takeaways so far? And what are your plans for the next months as the President of the SGC?

Due to the COVID-19 we are currently not able to engage the members as we used to. But as a chamber we tried to act very quickly and efficiently in this situation, and I believe we found a good solution to stand by the community. Since the Circuit Breaker has come into force and working from
home has become the new normal for many, our members are offered high quality webinars on a regular basis, now. They receive competent information from experts on how to cope with the current situation. These experts who are in many cases fellow chamber members are proof that we try hard to be a platform for members by members. So far this has been received very positively by the community.

Due to this special situation in view of COVID-19 our outreach to our members has been a bit overwhelming these last days. We would like to keep our members engaged and our challenge is that at times, some requests or initiatives are also brought to our attention on a very short notice.

Besides the webinars we offer to our members, the service department of the SGC, under the brand DE International, provides now virtual services, like: Virtual Business Matchings, a Market Entry Accelerator for German businesses who need business support in Singapore, Webinar Solutions or virtual trade fair support. Of course, we are always looking for further possibilities to offer the best benefits for our members and clients. This is to ensure that companies can rely on the SGC as a keystone partner here in Singapore, also during situations like the one we are currently experiencing.

Now regarding my plans for this year, we have set ourselves the annual theme of sustainable growth. Especially during times like these we want to look even more into this topic and help our members to generate sustainable growth during and after this crisis. In doing so we will offer appropriate exchanges. For the time being digitally, but we hope we can go back to meeting each other for events later this year when the COVID-19 situation has calmed down and once it is safe again.

As you just mentioned, sustainable growth is SGC’s topic of the year and will indeed become even more important over the next few months. What is your assessment of the German business in Singapore and Southeast Asia and how can the SGC help as a partner?

It is no surprise that there is a great deal of uncertainty at the moment and based on surveys we have conducted with our member companies we know that the COVID-19 outbreak has a severely disruptive impact on their businesses for the majority of them. This, largely, is due to travel restrictions and decreased demand for products and services. Both go together, sales performance suffers as business partners and clients cannot meet.

As the Circuit Breaker has been extended, we will continue to conduct surveys with our members to gain the best insight on their situation. This will give us an understanding on how we can further support them both right now and after the crisis. It will be interesting to see how the economy will develop after the Coronavirus pandemic. And if there will be fundamental changes or if the pandemic has even opened a window to creating new ways of dealing with certain things.

However, we do not know yet, but it certainly is a new challenge for the economy. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that as a business location, Singapore will be able to overcome these extraordinary challenges and emerge stronger than ever. Work processes may be adapted and more openness towards digital solutions could be achieved. And, it is of utmost importance that the markets stay open during COVID-19. German and Singapore business are very active in trade, in imports and exports, and for this reason open markets are a must. These are all topics we will be dealing with in the next weeks and months.

We are the Singaporean-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce, a bilateral chamber, with members from Germany and Singapore. And it is against this backdrop that we, the SGC, and also, I
personally as the SGC-President, will try our best in further promoting bilateral business relations and bringing business partners together.

When "normal" everyday life resumes, what are you looking forward to most as President of the SGC?

I think we all feel the same, how valuable and precious it is to be with others. I am really looking forward to meeting my friends, my colleagues at work and of course our members in person. I am also looking forward to hosting SGC events again and to welcoming as many of our members as possible. The virtual world has certainly shown us what is possible, and it definitely will open some new perspectives. However, it will never be able to replace being together face to face. This is exactly a topic I would like to discuss with our members by also sharing views and experiences. The consequences of this period in terms of necessary changes will be the foundation for a highly intensive debate. And if I may add, in all honesty, I am looking very much forward to have a nice dinner in a restaurant again.