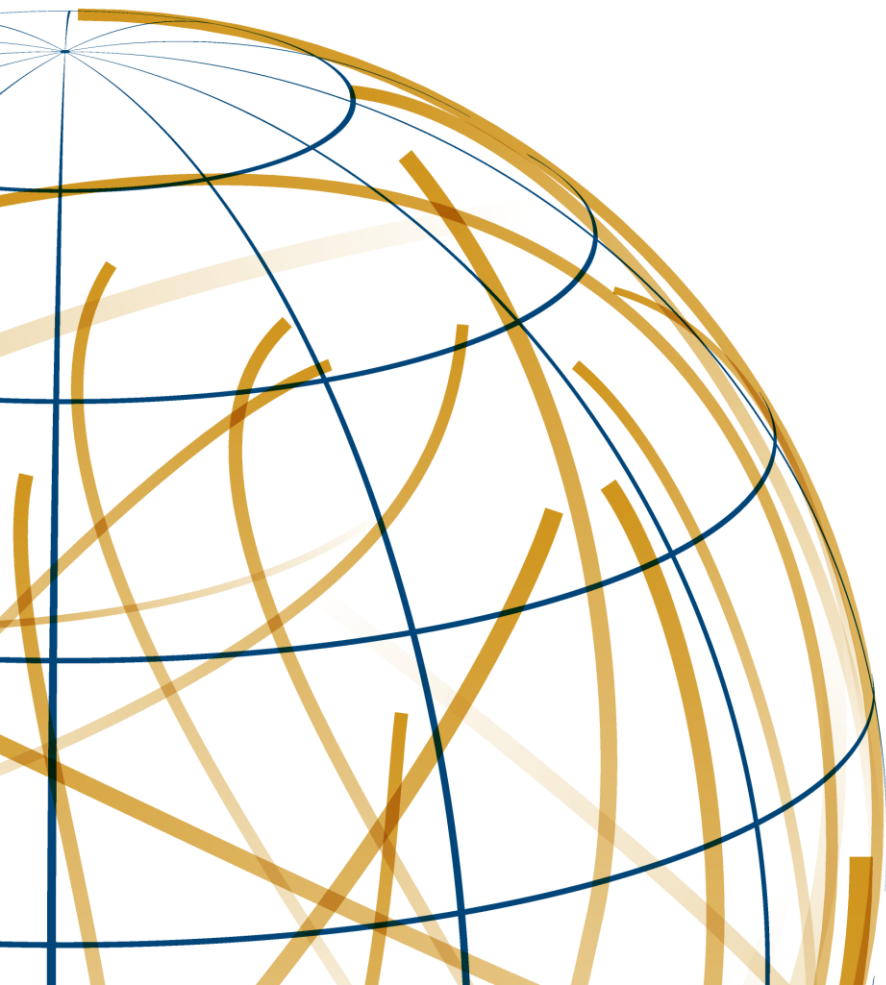


SWP Research Paper

Nadine Godehardt

The Logic of Germany's China Policy in the Zeitenwende



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 16
October 2024, Berlin

- So far, there has been no sign of a *Zeitenwende* in Germany's China policy. No comprehensive structural changes or adjustments in China-related institutions and administration have been observed (so far).
- Germany's China policy in recent years has been characterised by the need to safeguard Germany as a business location. Germany's Strategy on China is therefore more of a strategy on Germany. There is no overarching, long-term goal for German-Chinese relations.
- The logic of Germany's China policy is driven by two principles of action: self-protection and political indifference. Self-protection is more inward-looking ("safeguarding the domestic political system"), political indifference is more outward-looking ("dealing with China"). Both principles are linked by a reactive element.
- The characterisation of China as a "partner, competitor and systemic rival" is no longer appropriate and must be updated. Germany's China policy needs a debate on goals that should determine German-Chinese relations in the future.
- As well as a debate on goals, a debate on *preparedness* will be necessary to permanently relieve the burden on relevant institutions and the administration and prepare them for future challenges in dealing with Chinese actors.

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ISSN (Print) 2747-5123
ISSN (Online) 1863-1053
DOI: 10.18449/2024RP16

(English version of
SWP-Studie 20/2024)

Table of Contents

5	Issues and Conclusions
7	The Myth of Zeitenwende and Germany's China Policy
10	Contextual Factors of Change in Germany's China Policy
11	Global context
13	Chinese policy under Xi Jinping
15	The End of Self-fulfilment in Dealing with China (2013–2021)
19	Less Dependency, More Safeguarding (2021–2024)
21	China policy positions in the Bundestag and the Federal Government
28	De-risking and the economic security of Europe and Germany
28	Principles of Germany's China Policy
28	Self-protection and securitisation
30	Political indifference as a principle of Germany's China policy
35	Conclusions
36	Abbreviations

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*The author would like to thank Clara Hörning for compiling
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The Logic of Germany's China Policy in the Zeitenwende

Germany's China policy is in the midst of a *Zeitenwende* (turning-point in history), the impact of which is not yet fully foreseeable. There is (as yet) no sign of an epochal break resulting in comprehensive structural changes in Germany's China policy. However, the myth of *Zeitenwende* is also having an impact on Germany's China policy. As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz described it in the US journal *Foreign Affairs* in December 2022, there is a correlation between the narrative of the global *Zeitenwende* and China's role in the world, which can shape Germany's dealings with China.

This analysis will show that the language used in German government documents and debates in the Bundestag has become more direct and critical in relation to China. At the same time, awareness of Germany's systemic rivalry with China, its strategic dependencies on China and other economic risks has grown significantly. This awareness was partly anchored in Germany's Strategy on China as well as in other sector-specific policy strategies of the German government. There has also been an increase in debates on "China-related issues" in the various Bundestag committees, both in plenary sessions and in the Foreign Affairs Committee, for example. There is general agreement that things cannot go on as they are. In terms of content, this can be seen in the gradual shift away from the self-fulfilment of German actors in and with China that has been noticeable since 2013. The current focus is on the safeguarding and self-protection of Germany (and Europe) as a business location vis-à-vis China (keyword: *de-risking*).

This analysis will demonstrate that self-protection is a key principle of Germany's China policy. Consequently, this China policy is essentially about Germany and not China. There is therefore a danger that the China issue is primarily used (and useful) to legitimise domestic policy arguments and decisions. Since self-protection is usually a first step towards a comprehensive process of securitisation, it may become even more common in the future for political decision-makers to strategically use the issue of China for other contexts and goals of German policy, while

neglecting actual and deeper engagement with China, especially in political administration.

Another key feature of Germany's China policy is that political actors have not (yet) decided on a longer-term *goal* for relations with China. The principle of political indifference makes it clear that this is not a coincidence, but a deliberate choice. The lack of goals in Germany's China policy means that competences and responsibilities for its direction ultimately – and deliberately – remain ambivalent. Accordingly, political indifference in dealing with China primarily promotes a reactive adaptation policy and a persistence in partial *objectives* and instruments, as shown, for example, by the focus on minimising risks, reducing strategic dependencies or strengthening synergies between civilian and military research. Rarely is it a matter of strategically relieving the administration, for example through preventative and best possible preparation for new crisis situations, the consolidation of experience or the structural development and expansion of knowledge about China.

Two conclusions for Germany's China policy can be drawn from this analysis:

Firstly, there is a need for a debate on the future goal of German-Chinese relations that goes beyond the role ascribed to China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival. Ideally, such a debate would have preceded the discussions on a China strategy. The question of what China represents for Germany (and Europe) characterises only one aspect of German-Chinese relations. What is still missing is an answer to the question of where Germany's China policy should ultimately lead. China under Xi Jinping (President, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] and Chairman of the Central Military Commission), plays a decisive role in the global *Zeitenwende* marked by the German government – in other words, a radical change in world politics. Against this background, the formulation of a target vision for German-Chinese relations is necessary and will at the same time point the way forward for Germany's view of the future structure of the international order.

Secondly, a *preparedness* debate is required to prepare the political apparatus for future challenges and crises in dealing with Chinese actors and thus relieve the pressure on it. The focus here is on building up and expanding strategic knowledge of China, initially in the (federal) political administration ("working level"), which will also outlast the next election cycle.

The Myth of Zeitenwende and Germany's China Policy

The term “Zeitenwende” literally stands for “the end of an epoch and the beginning of a new era”.¹ It describes an all-encompassing epochal change. The starting point is usually a central historical moment that requires society and politics to adapt to the new circumstances. Consequently, a Zeitenwende or historical caesura organises the division of time into a before and an after. The historian Martin Sabrow distinguishes between a “retrospective caesura of interpretation and a caesura of experience or order in contemporary history”.² The former is attributed retrospectively, for example 8 May 1945 as “hour zero” for Germany after the end of the Second World War or the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648 as the beginning of the modern international system of sovereign states. According to Sabrow, the second kind of caesura characterises events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, “when world history held its breath”.³ Such turning points hit people with incredible force. They personalise history.

However, whether they mark an all-encompassing epochal break – a Zeitenwende – or have a more limited impact in terms of content and space can only be seen retrospectively. In this sense, the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 is first and foremost a Zeitenwende in experience that directly shapes the thoughts and actions of people in Europe to this day. In Germany, this was expressed just three days after the outbreak of the Russian war of aggression in the government statement by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz. He spoke prominently of a “Zeitenwende in the history of our continent” and that “the world afterwards [is] no longer the same as

the world before”. He also emphasised that “Putin’s war [means] a Zeitenwende, including for our foreign policy”.⁴

However, more than two years after the start of the war, it is still too early to tell the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on German, European and global history. For this reason, the present analysis is based on a semantic approach that will focus on describing the various levels of meaning of “Zeitenwende” and subsequently establish the connection to Germany’s China policy.

Since Scholz’s government statement on 27 February 2022, the term *Zeitenwende* has been directly associated with the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its impact on German politics. Such an attribution, sometimes chosen at random, marks the beginning of a new narrative or, to paraphrase the philosopher Roland Barthes, the beginning of the myth of a new era.⁵ Myth, understood as part of Barthes’ semiological concept, stands here in simplified terms for a “form of narrative, providing meaning and significance, often becoming so taken for granted that they are not even recognisable as myths, but become naturalised”.⁶ Myths therefore describe obvious truths and politicise the self-evident.⁷ The

1 See *Zeitenwende*, Duden (online), <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Zeitenwende> (accessed 30 July 2024).

2 Martin Sabrow, “Zäsuren in der Zeitgeschichte”, Version: 1.0, in *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 3 June 2013, https://docupedia.de/zg/sabrow_zaesuren_v1_de_2013 (accessed 30 July 2024).

3 Ibid.

4 Federal Government, “Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin”, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378> (accessed 30 July 2024).

5 See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, 1972).

6 Halvard Leira and Benjamin de Carvalho, “The Function of Myths in International Relations: Discipline and Identity”, in *The SAGE Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations*, ed. Andreas Gofas, Inanna Hamati-Ataya and Nicolas Onuf (London, 2018), 222 – 35 (223).

7 See also Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory. A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon, 2005), 7.

self-evident nature of the myth is currently obvious, for example, in the fact that society and politics immediately understand when people talk about a “Zeitenwende in history”.⁸ Myths are therefore inescapable in political discourse from a certain point onwards; they even legitimise political decisions.

As discourse researcher Mario Bisiada points out, the German Zeitenwende narrative, for example, has developed a certain political and strategic usefulness for the German government. In his analysis, Bisiada emphasises the discursive construction of a new reality in which the Zeitenwende as a strategic narrative indicates an existential threat to Germany, which enables Chancellor Scholz to present his defence policy measures as having no alternative. He continues: “The German discourse on the Russian invasion of Ukraine thus constructs a perspective that explicitly relegates ‘us’ to the passive observer’s perspective, to those who now have to react to the forceful loss of ‘yesterday’s certainties’.”⁹ The focus here is on the function that a myth can take on as a narrative in political discourse.

Since, according to Roland Barthes, myths are social and linguistic constructions that reinterpret existing signs and their meaning (or, as here, establish a connection between the Zeitenwende and the Russian invasion of Ukraine),¹⁰ they can also develop different levels of meaning. Semiological analysis helps us to recognise the different levels of the term “Zeitenwende”.

On the one hand, its use implies a concrete upheaval in national politics, especially in German security and defence policy, but ultimately also in all areas of German politics – in the sense of an all-encompassing national epochal change.¹¹ Zeitenwende specifically describes a turnaround and nourishes the

“sometimes heated debate about normative foundations and the claim to shape German foreign policy”.¹²

On the other hand, Zeitenwende also includes a global epochal change. The Russian war of aggression sealed the end of the post-Cold War era. The turn of an era is therefore a manifestation of the drastically changed (German) perception of the international liberal order and world politics. It implies an all-encompassing global epochal change. This global understanding of Zeitenwende is also emphasised by Chancellor Scholz’s article in the US journal *Foreign Affairs* from December 2022, in which the first sentence reads: “The world is facing a *Zeitenwende*: an epochal tectonic shift.”¹³

The global Zeitenwende and China are brought into a direct linguistic context.

What is important for the present analysis is where China is positioned within this global significance of the myth of the Zeitenwende. The direct linguistic connection between China and the global Zeitenwende is crucial.¹⁴ The *Foreign Affairs* article makes it clear that Russia’s war of aggression triggered the Zeitenwende and “ended an era”. China’s rise, on the other hand, is not only a further reason for the tectonic shifts, but also has a direct impact on the shape of the future international order (*the new multipolar*

8 “Zeitenwende” was voted Word of the Year 2022 by the Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache (GfdS) e.V.; see GfdS, “GfdS wählt ‘Zeitenwende’ zum Wort des Jahres 2022”, press release, 9 December 2022, <https://gfdS.de/wort-des-jahres-2022> (accessed 30 July 2024).

9 See Mario Bisiada, “The Discursive Construction of a New Reality in Olaf Scholz’s *Zeitenwende* Speech”, *Critical Discourse Studies* (2023): 1 – 18 (2), DOI: 10.1080/17405904.2023.2186450.

10 Barthes also calls this meta-language.

11 Scholz emphasises in the government statement of 27 February 2022 (see note 4): “One thing is clear: we must invest significantly more in the security of our country to protect our freedom and our democracy. This is a major national endeavour.”

12 Manuel Fröhlich, “‘Wenn möglich bitte wenden?’ Die deutsche Außenpolitik und die Navigation der Zeitenwende”, *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 33 (2023): 81 – 92 (82), DOI: 10.1007/s41358-022-00338-y.

13 Olaf Scholz, “The Global Zeitenwende. How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era”, *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 1 (January and February 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/olaf-scholz-global-zeitenwende-how-avoid-new-cold-war> (accessed 30 July 2024). Similar formulations can be found in Germany’s National Security Strategy, which was presented by the Federal Government in mid-June 2023 and which, alongside the Strategy on China, represented another central strategic process of the Federal Government under the auspices of the Chancellery. The National Security Strategy states: “We live in a world in transition. Our international and security environment is becoming more multipolar and unstable [...]”; see Federal Foreign Office, ed., *Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany. National Security Strategy* (Berlin, June 2023), 22, <https://www.nationale-sicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf> (accessed 6 August 2024).

14 See Scholz, “The Global Zeitenwende” (see note 13).

world).¹⁵ The global *Zeitenwende* therefore implies that China is both (a/the) cause of the global upheaval and (a/the) challenge for the future of the rules-based order.

For this reason, analysing and reflecting on Germany's China policy is certainly representative of discussing the broader question of how Germany is positioning itself in the face of the global *Zeitenwende*. The aim here is therefore to examine the extent to which a *Zeitenwende* can be observed in Germany's China policy. To this end, it is important to decipher the logic of Germany's current China policy, with a focus on working out the central principles of political action that ultimately characterise Germany's China policy in the new era. Furthermore, this analysis highlights several dangers that arise from the logic of Germany's China policy, but also makes suggestions and recommendations to counter these.

15 Scholz writes: "Russia's war of aggression might have triggered the *Zeitenwende*, but the tectonic shifts run much deeper." This depth primarily refers to China. See Scholz, "The Global *Zeitenwende*" (see note 13).

Contextual Factors of Change in Germany's China Policy

The last decade of Sino-German relations has seen a whole series of characterising events.¹⁶ Three situations in 2014, 2022 and 2023 symbolise the extent to which bilateral relations have changed. They also illustrate the effect that developments in world politics and Chinese policy under Xi Jinping have on Germany's policy towards China.

Xi Jinping's inaugural visit to Europe in March 2014 also took him to Germany, where he visited the port of Duisburg, among other places. Together with the then-Federal Minister of Economics Sigmar Gabriel and the then-Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia Hannelore Kraft, he received a freight train of the Chinese state-owned company Yuxinou, arriving from the central Chinese metropolis of Chongqing at Duisburg freight station. Xi's visit to Duisburg underlined the importance of the Silk Road initiative he had announced in autumn 2013. The city is one of the end points of the overland transport route from China via Central Asia to Europe, which was presented as an alternative to sea and air freight. Hannelore Kraft called the train connection "an impressive example of the dynamic trade relations between our two countries",¹⁷. At the time, the political scope of the Silk Road Initiative had not yet been recognised in Germany and Europe. Today's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was seen, especially at the beginning (up to 2015), primarily as a further development of the existing transport infrastructure between China and Europe and therefore as an opportunity for the logistics sector in particular.¹⁸ At the time, Germany's China

policy was still characterised by the opportunities and possibilities of self-fulfilment for certain sectors – less so by the risks.¹⁹

The second event involves the resumption of direct visits during the Covid-19 pandemic and then following the lifting of the zero Covid policy in China, which began in December 2022. This phase included Chancellor Scholz's inaugural visit to Beijing in early November 2022 – three years after Angela Merkel's last visit shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic. The conditions during Scholz's trip were still extremely unusual. Due to the strict zero-Covid policy at the time, Scholz and his business delegation, which was reduced to twelve CEOs, only spent a few hours in the Chinese capital. All those involved were in a completely sealed-off "corona bubble" and only journalists who had travelled with them were able to report on the meetings and the press statements read out.²⁰ Scholz explained the reasons for his visit in advance in a guest article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In this article and in his press statement after the meeting with then-Prime Minister Li Keqiang, he pointed out a whole range of critical issues, such as the fact that the Chinese government had also com-

16 This period also marks the beginning of the second grand coalition under Chancellor Angela Merkel (2013 – 2021) and of Xi Jinping's term of office (since 2012 – 2013).

17 See "Chinas Staatschef Xi gibt NRW die Ehre", *Deutsche Welle* (DW) (online), 29 March 2014, <https://www.dw.com/de/chinas-staatschef-xi-gibt-nrw-die-ehre/a-17530526> (accessed 30 July 2024).

18 See in more detail Nadine Godehardt, "Andocken – Diskursmacht – Versicherheitlichung. Chinas geopolitischer

Code und die Belt and Road Initiative", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 21 October 2022, <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/chinas-neue-seidenstrassen-2022/514460/andocken-diskursmacht-versicherheitlichung> (accessed 30 July 2024).

19 Sebastian Heilmann, then Director of the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), before then-Chancellor Angela Merkel's seventh trip to China: "The most important topic is always Germany's economic engagement in China", quoted in Matthias von Hein, "Heilmann: 'Wirtschaft gibt Politikempfehlungen'", *DW* (online), 6 July 2014, <https://www.dw.com/de/heilmann-wirtschaft-gibt-politikempfehlungen/a-17759045> (accessed 30 July 2024).

20 There were no public press conferences.

mitted itself to respecting human rights.²¹ The visit under coronavirus conditions made it clear from the rather bizarre television images alone how much China had changed under Xi — for example, its centralisation of decision-making processes to the CCP or its trend towards securitisation — without the changes in the regime having to be presented in detail.

The third event is Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's visit to Beijing in April 2023 and the almost immediate return visit to Berlin in early May 2023 by the now deposed Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang. The exchange of statements between Baerbock and Qin during the press conferences gave a clear picture of how much the context, language and priorities in German-Chinese relations have changed.²² The press conferences in both Beijing and Berlin revealed the different perspectives on geopolitical events, above all the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The meetings made it clear that the two participants — the first female German foreign minister on the one hand and Qin Gang, a so-called wolf warrior,²³ on the other — also found it difficult to develop a common language, a linguistic understanding. As a result, the exchange was characterised by open, direct and critical language on both sides in an atmosphere that was respectful but dominated by mutual mistrust.

A whole series of factors explain the shifts in Germany's China policy, which is why the current coalition government agreement has already stated: "To be able to realise our values and interests in the systemic rivalry with China, we will need a comprehensive Strategy on China in Germany within the framework of the common EU-China policy."²⁴ The

decision to draw up the first ever country strategy by a German government — and thus attempt a reorientation of Germany's China policy — coincides with the gradual fragmentation of the international order (global context) and the changes in China (the Xi factor).

Global context

It should be noted that the phase of global politics in which we currently find ourselves is characterised by the increasing fragility of the liberal international order. Existing structures and institutions of the Western-liberal international order and thus also of the global economic order continue to exist but are often no longer able to provide sufficient stability and security. World politics is stuck in an interregnum, a permanent phase of in-between orders which, according to Antonio Gramsci, does not correspond to a complete state of disorder, but rather to a consolidated semi-structured order in which "the old dies and the new cannot be born".²⁵ These developments are shaking up long-accepted views in international politics and are consequently having an impact on German China policy.

Some key findings are associated with the interregnum.

Firstly, liberal democracy and market economy have not become established worldwide since the end of the Soviet Union; in fact, there are currently more autocratic states than democratic ones, and democratic transitions processes are on the decline.²⁶

Secondly, globalisation as we knew it is disappearing.²⁷ A high level of economic integration and con-

21 Olaf Scholz, "Darum geht es bei meiner Reise nach China", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 November 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kanzler-gastbeitrag-faz-china-2139416> (accessed 30 July 2024).

22 The aforementioned visits by Scholz and Baerbock to China are not directly comparable. That is not the aim here, but they do symbolise the extent of the changes in German-Chinese relations.

23 For more detail on Qin Gang's rise and political dismissal: Terril Yue Jones, "I Watched the Dramatic Rise of Qin Gang — and Never Expected His Sudden Fall", *Politico*, 15 August 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/08/15/chinese-diplomat-qin-gang-fall-00110333> (accessed 30 July 2024).

24 See SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and FDP, *Koalitionsvertrag 2021–2025: Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit* (7 December 2021), 124, [https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf)

[Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf) (accessed 30 July 2024).

25 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London, 1971), 276. See in more detail: Nadine Godehardt, *Wie China Weltpolitik formt. Die Logik von Pekings Außenpolitik unter Xi Jinping*, SWP-Studie 19/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2020), DOI: 10.18449/2020S19.

26 See Bertelsmann Stiftung, ed., *Transformation Index BTI 2022: Governance in International Comparison* (Gütersloh, 2022), <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/themen/aktuelle-meldungen/2022/februar/demokratie-weltweit-unter-druck/detail-content-210640-3> (accessed 30 July 2024).

27 See the study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which identifies various reasons for the change in globalisa-

nectivity between states is no longer automatically taken as a guarantee of stability and peace. This can be seen politically in an increase in economic security strategies and a growing focus on sanctions policy, or generally in the political focus on the connection between business/industry and national security, for example in the EU, Japan or the USA. Academically, it is perceptible in discussions about *weaponised interdependence* or the return of geopolitics in economic issues, for example in relation to raw materials or digital technology. Both the political and academic discourse underline the fact that economic and security issues are often no longer considered separately and that the possibility of a strategic instrumentalisation of economic dependencies and asymmetric network structures (e.g. infrastructure, logistics, supply chains) is increasingly coming to the fore.

The third consequence of this is the increase in mistrust in international relations. Trust has always been an implicit basis of relations between states. It partly justified the creation of international organisations, just as it nurtured the conviction that mutual economic dependencies pacify rather than exacerbate conflicts.²⁸ According to Niklas Luhmann, mistrust cannot simply be equated with a “lack of trust” — the difference is more fundamental. This is because trust fulfils a specific function, especially in institutions and relationships. Trust relieves pressure and reduces complexity — it institutionalises familiarity in relationships.²⁹

Increasing mistrust in international relations favours radical attributions.

Luhmann emphasises: “Those who do not trust must resort to functionally equivalent strategies of

tion: Shekhar Aiyar et al., *Geoeconomic Fragmentation and the Future of Multilateralism*, IMF Staff Discussion Notes 2023/001 (Washington, D.C.: IMF, 15 January 2023), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Staff-Discussion-Notes/Issues/2023/01/11/Geo-Economic-Fragmentation-and-the-Future-of-Multilateralism-527266> (accessed 30 July 2024). I would like to thank Melanie Müller for this reference.

²⁸ Trust stands for the fundamental willingness of those involved to set aside their own interests or even to place themselves under the control of others within international organisations; see Aaron M. Hoffmann, “A Conceptualisation of Trust in International Relations”, *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 3 (2002): 375–401.

²⁹ For more detail, see Niklas Luhmann, *Vertrauen*, 5th ed. (Vienna, 2014 [1968]).

reducing complexity to be able to define a practically meaningful situation at all.”³⁰ This often leads to radical attributions, such as seeing the other as an enemy, or to a lifestyle characterised by strategies of avoidance, renunciation or even struggle. Luhmann points out that mistrust also simplifies the processes in relationships in its own way, but negatively rather than positively (as would be the case with trust).³¹ In everyday political life, for example, it opens up easier opportunities for deception and targeted mutual disinformation, while at the same time reinforcing the establishment of echo chambers on all sides. And if everyone only perceives whatever confirms their own views and nobody is prepared to question their own convictions, this makes communication in international relations even more difficult.

Fourthly, in this environment of global uncertainty, cooperation continues to take place. However, the recent emergence of “connectivity” in the field of international relations, both in academia and in political thinking, points to new realities and challenges.³² On the one hand, connectivity does not exclude friction but rather transforms the underlying normative idea of cooperation, but not necessarily the quantity of global linkages.³³ In other words, connectivity does not define the nature of international relations. It produces international relations with a much lower threshold, but these are not automatically more peaceful or conflictual per se. On the other hand, this change (from cooperation to connectivity)

³⁰ Ibid., 92f.

³¹ Consequently: “Wer mißtraut, braucht mehr Informationen und verengt zugleich die Information, auf die zu stützen er sich getraut. Er wird von *weniger* Informationen *stärker* abhängig.” [“Those who distrust need more information and at the same time limit the information which they trust for their argumentation. They become *more* dependent on *less* information.”] Ibid., 93.

³² See Nadine Godehardt and Karoline Postel-Vinay, *Connectivity and Geopolitics: Beware the ‘New Wine in Old Bottles’ Approach*, SWP Comment 35/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2020), DOI: 10.18449/2020C35.

³³ There is a large number of new unilateral interstate alliances, especially in the Indo-Pacific, but also transregionally; see Kei Koga, “A New Strategic Unilateralism in the Indo-Pacific”, *Asia Policy (National Bureau of Asia Research)* 17, no. 4 (2022): 27–34, DOI: 10.1353/asp.2022.0063, and, for cross-regional trends, Nickolay Mladenov, *Unilateralism: A Concept that is Changing the World Order* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute, 14 April 2023), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unilateralism-concept-changing-world-order> (accessed 1 August 2024).

is taking place in a completely different international environment. The projection of a liberal international order with soft borders, which still prevailed at the end of the last millennium, is increasingly losing significance with the rise of more security-oriented states that are once again focusing more on territorial sovereignty.

Chinese policy under Xi Jinping

In addition to the changes in global politics, some (apparent) certainties about China have continued to dissolve. Firstly, the widespread hope in the West that China would continue to adapt to the liberal international order when Xi Jinping took office was not realised.³⁴ In other words, economic and political reforms have taken place, but they did not result in the hoped-for further opening-up of China or a transformation of the political regime towards a (Western) liberal democracy. On the contrary: since the 19th Party Congress of the CCP in October 2017 and the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2018, if not before, the concentration on the person of Xi and the CCP, of which he is General Secretary, has become increasingly clear. At the party congress, for example, the “Xi Jinping ideas on Chinese-style socialism for a new era” were included in the party constitution, putting them on a par with the ideas of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping after just five years.³⁵ Xi himself was described in advance as the “core of the Central Committee”, which was intended to emphasise his “epoch-making” position.³⁶ Further comprehensive reforms were then decided at the NPC,

formally granting the CCP the most important role in the state. China scholar Heike Holbig describes it as follows: “The party is no longer above, beside or below the law, it is now the law.”³⁷ The merging of party and state is further reinforced under Xi by the fact that the term limit for the president has been lifted.³⁸

Secondly, this goes hand in hand with a continued emphasis on security in Chinese politics. In his first speeches in April 2014, Xi already argued in favour of a concept of “comprehensive national security”. The passing of the National Security Law on 1 July 2015 then marked the beginning of a series of laws and regulations that have securitised almost every area of politics, the economy and society to this day. The impression is growing that securing the regime in all areas is replacing the “development first” principle, i.e. the focus on economic development as a prerequisite for national security. This is continuously changing the target orientation of Chinese policy in the direction of “security first”.³⁹

Thirdly, in his first term of office, Xi succeeded in replacing the idea of China as the world's workbench with the image of a super-modern, high-tech and digitalised state. One example of this is the “Made in China 2025” initiative, which revealed Xi's ambitions in 2015. The aim is to catch up with the leading technology nations, primarily through targeted Chinese investment in foreign industry and high technology. Ten key areas are named, including electromobility, information technology, aerospace, robotics and the energy sector, which are to be particularly promoted

34 Especially at the beginning, Xi was seen as a reformer; see John Simpson, “New Leader Xi Jinping Opens Door to Reform in China”, *The Guardian* (online), 10 August 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/10/china-xi-jinping-opens-door-reform> (accessed 1 August 2024).

35 See Heike Holbig, *Making China Great Again – Xi Jinpings Abschied von der Reformära*, GIGA Focus Asien no. 2 (Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies [GIGA], 2018), https://www.giga-hamburg.de/assets/tracked/pure/21580622/gf_asien_1802.pdf (accessed 1 August 2024).

36 See Paul Joscha Kohlenberg, *Chinas Kommunistische Partei vor Xi Jinpings zweiter Amtsperiode als Vorsitzender. Im Spannungsfeld individueller Machtkonsolidierung und kollektiver Parteitraditionen*, SWP-Aktuell 3/2017 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2017), p. 1, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/chinas-kommunistische-partei-vor-xi-jinping-zweiter-amtsperiode-als-vorsitzender> (accessed 1 August 2024).

37 Holbig, *Making China Great Again* (see note 35), 4.

38 A similar restriction did not and does not apply to the office of General Secretary of the CCP. That is why this revocation was so central. It was further reinforced by the dissolution of the Ministry of Discipline Inspection and the establishment of a new National Supervisory Commission; see Jamie P. Horsley, “What's So Controversial about China's New Anti-corruption Body?” (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 30 May 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/whats-so-controversial-about-chinas-new-anti-corruption-body> (accessed 1 August 2024).

39 See Katja Drinhausen and Helena Legarda, “Comprehensive National Security” *Unleashed: How Xi's Approach Shapes China's Policies at Home and Abroad* (Berlin: MERICS, 15 September 2022), <https://www.merics.org/en/report/comprehensive-national-security-unleashed-how-xis-approach-shapes-chinas-policies-home-and> (accessed 1 August 2024).

and strengthened.⁴⁰ Linked to this is the development of a military-civilian industrial complex, which has been accelerated under Xi. After all, the integration of economic, technological and military expertise is an important prerequisite for establishing China as a new world power.⁴¹ This has been part of China's national strategy since Xi's speech at the 19th Party Congress of the CCP and manifested itself as early as January 2017, nine months earlier, in the establishment of a central development committee for military-civilian fusion, which is chaired by Xi himself and includes other high-ranking party cadres.⁴²

The world should become more Chinese – that is Xi Jinping's goal of a “community with a shared future for mankind”.

Fourthly, the developments confirm the end of the narrative of China's rise. China under Xi is a global power that is endeavouring to shape world politics in the Chinese sense. The aim is no longer to adapt to the international order, but to create compatibility between the world order and the CCP.⁴³ In other words, the world is to become more Chinese. This ambition is expressed above all in the construction of a “community with a shared future for mankind”, which Xi presented in his first address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 and which he has repeatedly sought to establish as a central foreign policy goal in international discourse. Xi's “community” was incorporated into the CCP constitution at the 19th Party Congress and into the state constitution at the

13th NPC. It has thus become the official party slogan and continues to drive China's efforts to reform the global governance system in its own interests.⁴⁴

40 See Frederik Kunze and Torsten Windels, “Made in China 2025’: Technologietransfer und Investitionen in ausländische Hochtechnologiefirmen – Chinas Weg zum Konkurrenten um die Zukunftstechnologien”, *ifo Schnelldienst* 71, no. 14 (2018), <https://www.ifo.de/publikationen/2018/aufsatzzeitschrift/made-china-2025-technologietransfer-und-investitionen> (accessed 1 August 2024).

41 See Richard Bitzinger, “China's Shift from Civil-Military Integration to Military-Civil Fusion”, *Asia Policy* 16, no. 1 (2021): 5–24, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Asia-Policy-16.1-Jan-2021-Richard-Bitzinger.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

42 See Cheng Li, “China's Military-Civil Fusion: Objectives and Operations”, *China US Focus*, 30 August 2022, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/2022-CPC-congress/chinas-military-civil-fusion-objectives-and-operations> (accessed 1 August 2024).

43 See in more detail Godehardt, *Wie China Weltpolitik formt* (see note 25).

44 The operational pillars for the reform and transformation of the global governance system are the Global Development Initiative (GDI) announced in 2021, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) presented in 2022 and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) proposed by Xi in 2023.

The End of Self-fulfilment in Dealing with China (2013 – 2021)

In a context where some certainties in global politics and with regard to China are dissolving, German society as well as business and political circles have ultimately shown an increased sensitivity towards Chinese actors since Xi Jinping took office in 2012 – 2013. Furthermore, the developments during this period also demonstrate the end of German self-fulfilment in its dealings with China. In other words, systemic divergences are increasingly coming to the fore in relations and making it more difficult to carry on as before.

This was first revealed in the realisation that Chinese actors were getting serious. The rapid rise in Chinese direct investment in Germany in 2016 and 2017 and, above all, the increase in strategic investment in key technological areas as part of the implementation of the Made-in-China 2025 strategy clearly indicated this. An eye-opener was the 2016 takeover of the mechanical engineering company Kuka, which specialises in robotics, by the Chinese company Midea, which initially acquired almost 95 per cent of the shares.⁴⁵ At the time, this acquisition was approved by the Ministry of Economic Affairs without a formal

review process.⁴⁶ Following the takeover, however, concerns about the sell-off of German technology grew, partly due to Kuka's importance for the German Industry 4.0 initiative.

Furthermore, the assessment of critical infrastructures and key technologies and their importance for Germany's national security changed. This nexus became apparent when the Chinese state-owned company State Grid Corporation of China (SGCC) attempted to acquire shares in the transmission system operator 50Hertz in March and June 2018. In the first attempt, the Belgian transmission system operator Elia exercised its right of first refusal and acquired 20 per cent from the Australian investor IFM, which State Grid was actually targeting. The second attempt was averted indirectly by the German government via the development bank KfW, which bought a further 20 per cent of IFM's shares.⁴⁷ As a direct consequence, the Ger-

⁴⁵ Kuka is now completely Chinese, with the Midea Group from Guangdong as its sole owner. The headquarters are still in Augsburg, and there is a job guarantee for the employees until 2025. See "Kuka soll komplett in chinesischem Konzern Midea übergehen", *Industrieanzeiger*, 19 May 2022, <https://industrieanzeiger.industrie.de/technik/automatisierung/kuka-midea-uebernahme> (accessed 1 August 2024). The parent company demanded the exclusion of the last minority shareholders in November 2022 and compensated them – with sums significantly below the 2016 offer price. In November 2021, the parent company Midea decided to delist Kuka from the stock exchange; see "Deutsche High-Tech-Industrie aus China: Der Fall KUKA", *Spruchverfahren direkt*, 26 June 2024, <https://www.spruchverfahren-direkt.de/?p=3232> (accessed 1 August 2024).

⁴⁶ Kuka is just one well-known example; others include the takeovers of Osram (LED technology) by a Chinese consortium; EEW (waste incineration) by Beijing Enterprises; and the sale of speciality machinery manufacturer Krauss-Maffei to ChemChina. They all took place in 2016.

⁴⁷ The response from the then-Parliamentary State Secretary Oliver Wittke to a question from Annalena Baerbock, then a member of the Bundestag, shows how comparatively cautious the German government was at the time in responding to questions about "critical infrastructure" and dependencies on Chinese investors. In his response, Wittke referred to existing legislation and treated the 50Hertz case as one of many. He emphasised: "Direct investments through which a non-EU acquirer gains control of at least 25 percent of the voting rights in the operator of a critical infrastructure are generally examined to determine whether the acquisition poses a potential threat to public order or security due to its particular significance for the Federal Republic of Germany. [...] The present acquisition will be examined in

man government tightened the rules for foreign direct investment. For example, the threshold for certain critical infrastructures was lowered from 25 to 10 per cent.

However, a different picture emerged in the first intensive Huawei debate in 2018–2019, which concentrated on the extent to which components from the Chinese telecommunications manufacturer should be installed in the German 5G network. The difference to State Grid's attempt to buy into 50Hertz was that Huawei was and still is an integral part of the German telecommunications sector. The discussion centred on the extent to which the use of Chinese network technology for the new 5G mobile communications standard could pose a national security risk.⁴⁸ The debate revealed the entire spectrum of the dispute with China, as well as the increasing fusion of geopolitics, business, technology and security.⁴⁹ It emphasises the transition from cooperation to connectivity as a feature of international relations – not least in Germany's China policy.

In addition, criticism of human rights violations in China grew louder in German politics and society, with systemic divergences also becoming increasingly apparent. Among other things, this was characterised by developments in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. The direct trigger for the first wave of protests by the umbrella movement from September to December 2014 was a decision by the NPC that candidates for the election of Hong Kong's chief executive would be pre-

accordance with the applicable laws. Irrespective of specific acquisition transactions, the Federal Government regularly examines the legal basis of the investment review with regards to the need for adjustments." See German Bundestag, *Plenarprotokoll 19/35* (Berlin, 6 June 2018), 3331, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19035.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

48 This issue was discussed twice in the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the form of public talks with experts (March and November 2019).

49 An agreement was only reached in June 2024 after years of discussions on the Huawei issue. Components from Huawei and ZTE may no longer be installed in the 5G core networks until the end of 2026; critical components from both manufacturers must also be replaced in the 5G access and transport networks by the end of 2029 at the latest. See the notification from the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, "Stärkung der Sicherheit und technologischen Souveränität der deutschen 5G-Mobilfunknetze", 11 July 2024, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2024/07/5g.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

selected by Beijing. This prevented the public nomination of candidates and – in the view of the protesters – a free and democratic election of the head of government.⁵⁰ Heavy and extensive protests broke out again in 2019. The initial cause was a law proposed by the pro-China Hong Kong government in April of that year that would have allowed Hong Kong citizens to be extradited to China.⁵¹ Although the Hong Kong government withdrew the controversial law in September, the protests escalated into a partial paralysis of public transport infrastructure and open street fighting – a clear protest against the Hong Kong government and Beijing's influence.

About a year later, on 22 May 2020, the NPC in Beijing passed a National Security Law for Hong Kong. This law, which came into force on 30 June 2020, abruptly changed the legal situation in Hong Kong. The establishment of the "National Security Committee", which is under the supervision of the central government, enables Beijing, for example, to impose penalties independently of the Hong Kong judiciary.⁵² The Security Law for Hong Kong makes it clear that the CCP under Xi is constantly expanding its radius of control.

Unlike in 2014, this time there was noticeably more opposition in Germany and Europe. Following a motion by the FDP parliamentary group, the effects of the security law were debated in the Bundestag at the end of May 2020 and the then-CDU/CSU government faction called for a much tougher line to be taken by then-Chancellor Angela Merkel on this issue. Gyde Jensen from the FDP parliamentary group, which was in opposition at the time, demanded: "Hong Kong is at a crossroads, and this geopolitical competition between systems and values is coming to a head with Hong Kong. It's time for the German government to

50 See Nadine Godehardt, "Hongkong. Regenschirmbewegung", in *Urbane Räume. Proteste. Weltpolitik.*, ed. idem, SWP-Studie 17/2017 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2017), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/urbane-raeume-proteste-weltpolitik> (accessed 1 August 2024).

51 The explicit background was the murder of a young Hong Kong woman by her boyfriend while on holiday in Taipei; see Cindy Sui, "The Murder Behind the Hong Kong Protests: A Case Where No-one Wants the Killer", *BBC News*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50148577> (accessed 1 August 2024).

52 See Moritz Rudolf, *The Hong Kong National Security Law. A Harbinger of China's Emerging International Legal Discourse Power*, SWP Comment 56/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2020), DOI: 10.18449/2020C56.

take a stand in this competition of values and finally start showing China red lines.”⁵³ More important than the German government’s concrete reaction was the fact that different systems and values were becoming increasingly apparent and were being expressed, particularly in the debates in the Bundestag. Hong Kong was just one example of this, despite the iconic protests.

From 2013 to 2021, the general decline in civil society exchange (before it came to a complete standstill during the Covid-19 pandemic) was also a recurring theme. And since the publication of the China Cables in 2019, if not before, the human rights violations in Xinjiang have also been very present in politics and the media.⁵⁴ Taken together, all these developments revealed the new quality of the divergences between Germany (Europe) and China.

On the one hand, this was expressed in a China paper published by the Federation of German Industries (BDI) in January 2019, in which systemic competition with China and the country’s importance as a global power were named for the first time. The emphasis here was on the fact that “China’s state-centred economic system is in many respects at odds with the liberal and social market economy principles of the EU and many other countries”.⁵⁵ The comments

related to the impact on German (and European) companies. The focus was therefore on topics such as restricted market access for non-Chinese companies and the effects of the Chinese government’s massive subsidy policy on them.

In 2019, the EU deliberately opted for ambivalence in its dealings with China with the triad “partner, competitor, rival”.

On the other hand, the publication of the EU Strategic Outlook in March 2019 set a new benchmark for assessing China. The formulations chosen therein once again illustrate the end, at least rhetorically, of Europe’s policy of self-fulfilment in China and the growing perception of a change in the balance of power. It states that “the balance between challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted” and that “China can no longer be regarded as a developing country. It is a key global player and a leading technological power”.⁵⁶ As formulated in the strategy paper, China is a cooperation and negotiation partner, an economic competitor and – for the first time in an official EU document – a systemic rival that promotes an alternative governance model. Nevertheless, the strategy paper mainly concentrated on the equal organisation of economic relations (keyword: *level playing field*), on measures to strengthen the EU internal market (keyword: *screening mechanism for foreign direct investment*) and on a stronger focus on industrial policy.

The introduction of the triad “partner, competitor, systemic rival” was an expression of the EU’s now much more ambivalent attitude towards China. In other words, the EU assessed China’s behaviour with more mistrust, which was based on subjective experience with Chinese actors. The attribution to China of these roles of partner, competitor and rival reorganised European (and to some extent German) policy in dealings with China. This conscious political decision in favour of ambivalence at this time signalled above

53 See Deutscher Bundestag, *Plenarprotokoll 19/164* (Berlin, 29 May 2020), 20422, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19164.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024). Michael Brand from the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, then the governing party, was even clearer in his remarks, which also illustrate how the views on China increasingly diverged between the governing CDU/CSU party and the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag. Brand emphasised: “The leader – because that’s what Xi Jinping allows himself to be called by propaganda – has decided to take off his gloves and make tabula rasa. He wants to smash Hong Kong’s status for good by openly disregarding and violating international treaties. He wants to break the ‘recalcitrant’, democratic and liberal resistance there once and for all” (20430f.).

54 See “China Cables”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (online), n. d., <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/das-sind-die-china-cables-e185468/> (accessed 1 August 2024). This issue was also taken up in the plenary session of the Bundestag and in the Committee on Humanitarian Aid and Human Rights and generally increased the focus of some German parties on the human rights situation in China. For an evaluation of the agendas in various Bundestag committees, see Deutscher Bundestag, *Plenarprotokoll 19/133* (Berlin, 11 December 2019), <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19133.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

55 See Federation of German Industries (BDI), *Policy Paper China: Partner and Systemic Competitor – How Do We Deal with*

China’s State-led Economy (Berlin, 2019), 4, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/908170/02447d9bd668e912d44190c451c5a573/Stellungnahme-Iris-Ploeger-BDI-data.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

56 Here and below: European Commission, Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council, *EU-China Strategic Outlook* (Strasbourg, 12 March 2019), 1, <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

all the end of European naivety, especially in light of the unfair competitive conditions for European actors in China and the resulting lack of reciprocity.

Despite the triad of roles, the goal or target vision of EU-China policy remained unclear (as did the possible consequences of this circumstance for future German-Chinese relations). As a result, Europeans' awareness of China's ambivalent role for Europe (and Germany) only increased to a very limited extent their ambiguity competence in dealing with China.⁵⁷ Moreover, from today's perspective, the EU Strategic Outlook continued to emphasise the language of engagement with China. Although being labelled a systemic rival was a clear statement from the EU that things could no longer continue as before, this initially only had selective consequences, such as the introduction of European investment screening.

The effect on German political discourse and, above all, on the Chancellor was limited at the time. Angela Merkel continued to pursue a fairly cautious approach to China policy and refrained from direct confrontation. Her rather cooperative approach – particularly aiming not to jeopardise the conclusion of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the EU and China as part of Germany's EU Council Presidency in 2020 – led to increasing resistance within her own party, but there was also friction with representatives of other parties.⁵⁸ This situation in turn opened up the political debate for alternative views and topics in Germany's China policy. The above-mentioned triad was increasingly used by Ger-

man political parties to express the difficulties and challenges in dealing with China.⁵⁹

Relations with China were then explicitly addressed in the election manifestos of the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and Alliance 90/The Greens for the 2021 federal elections. Their tenor was considerably more critical and reflected the deepening polarisation in the public and academic discourse on China at the time.⁶⁰ This was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which severely restricted public life in Germany as well as direct contacts with foreign countries with the decision to impose the first lockdown in March 2020, if not before. The unclear origin of the new coronavirus⁶¹ and China's lack of support in clarifying it,⁶² but in particular China's monopoly in the production of protective masks, gloves and disinfectants at the beginning of the pandemic, drew increased political and societal attention to the negative effects of German and European dependencies on China.⁶³

57 Ambiguity competence is the ability to recognise, endure and productively implement uncertainties and ambiguity, for example in politics and society. It builds on the ability to tolerate ambiguity. See, e.g., Andreas Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen. Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne* (Berlin, 2019).

58 On the Comprehensive Investment Agreement, see Christiane Kühl, "Wirtschafts-Deal trotz Sorge um Menschenrechte und Sanktionen: Zerschellt Merckels China-Wunschplan?" *Merkur* (online), 18 May 2021, <https://www.merkur.de/politik/china-merkel-cai-eu-wirtschaft-deal-sanktionen-eklat-menschenrechte-xinjiang-widerstand-90481513.html> (accessed 1 August 2024). The disagreements over China policy were also exacerbated by Angela Merkel's early announcement that she would no longer run for the party chairmanship and would no longer be available as a candidate for chancellor in 2021; see Noah Barkin, *Germany's Strategic Gray Zone with China* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, March 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/germany-s-strategic-gray-zone-with-china-pub-81360> (accessed 1 August 2024).

59 See Frank Bickenback and Wan-Hsin Liu, *China: Partner, Wettbewerber, systemischer Rivale – was sagen die Wahlprogramme?* Kiel Focus (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy [ifw], September 2021), <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/de/publikationen/kiel-focus/china-partner-wettbewerber-systemischer-rivale-was-sagen-die-wahlprogramme> (accessed 1 August 2024).

60 For example, the statement by the German Association for Asian Studies, "Ein Plädoyer gegen Polarisierung", 12 June 2020, <https://asienforschung.de/ein-plaedoyer-gegen-polarisierung> (accessed 1 August 2024), and the interview with Doris Fischer from October 2020, Lars Friedrich, "Prof. Doris Fischer: 'Wir erleben eine Polarisierung'", *Der Aktionär*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.deraktionaer.de/artikel/kolumnen/prof-doris-fischer-wir-erleben-eine-polarisierung-20218389.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

61 See Gaviria A. Zapatero and Martin R. Barba, "What Do We Know about the Origin of COVID-19 Three Years Later?" *Revista Clínica Española (English Edition)* 223, no. 4 (April 2023): 240–43, DOI: 10.1016/j.rceng.2023.02.010.

62 See Peter Beaumont, "China Stalls WHO Mission to Investigate Origins of Coronavirus", *The Guardian*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/06/china-stalls-who-mission-to-investigate-origins-of-coronavirus> (accessed 1 August 2024).

63 See the position paper published by the SPD parliamentary group in the Bundestag on 30 June 2020 entitled *Souverän, regelbasiert und transparent. Eine sozialdemokratische China-Politik*, https://www.spdfraktion.de/system/files/documents/positions_papier_china.pdf (accessed 1 August 2024), 9: "The Covid-19 pandemic has also made it clear that Germany and the EU must not allow themselves to become unilaterally dependent on key technologies and critical raw materials."

Less Dependency, More Safeguarding (2021 – 2024)

The German government's coalition agreement, announced in early December 2021, also formulated the aim of producing a comprehensive Strategy on China. In the following 18 months, the debate on reducing strategic dependencies on China dominated public and political discussion on the direction that Germany's Strategy on China should take. This was intensified by the transnational effects of China's "zero Covid policy" during the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

There were two intensive phases of lockdowns in China. The first was at the very start of the pandemic, when Hubei province was gradually sealed off.⁶⁴ The second followed almost immediately after the Winter Olympics in Beijing, which took place in February 2022 in a strictly controlled "Olympic bubble".⁶⁵ In this second phase, a lockdown was imposed in Shanghai, among other places. Chinese policymakers were unprepared for the outbreak of the Omicron variant in spring 2022; Omicron hit a largely unvaccinated society and rapidly changed the incidence of infection in China. Officially, around 40,000 new infections per

day were observed in the months before November 2022.⁶⁶

The lockdown ordered in Shanghai at the end of March 2022 was exemplary in several respects: firstly, it became clear that the arbitrariness of the Chinese regime can be directed against everyone – not just minorities – when circumstances demand it. The two-month lockdown left behind a deeply traumatised society and continues to have an impact to this day.⁶⁷ Secondly, the images and videos of empty streets, sealed-off residential units and, in particular, hungry residents⁶⁸ reinforced the view that China under Xi has turned into a brutal, authoritarian regime with "totalitarian traits".⁶⁹ Thirdly, the Shanghai lockdown caused a huge traffic jam of container

64 See Mooketsi Molefi et al., "The Impact of China's Lockdown Policy on the Incidence of Covid-19: An Interrupted Time Series Analysis", *BioMed Research International* (October 2021), DOI: 10.1155/2021/9498029; see also Bingqin Li and Bei Lu, "How China Made Its COVID-19 Lockdown Work", *East Asia Forum*, 7 April 2020, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2020/04/07/how-china-made-its-covid-19-lockdown-work> (accessed 1 August 2024).

65 For a summary of countermeasures during the Beijing Olympics, see: International Olympic Committee, "Beijing 2022 COVID-19 Countermeasures Adjusted as the Closed Loop System Comes into Effect", 24 January 2022, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/beijing-2022-covid-19-countermeasures-adjusted-as-the-closed-loop-system-comes-into-effect> (accessed 1 August 2024).

66 See Xiao Wang, "How Chinese Attitudes toward COVID-19 Policies Changed between June and Early December 2022: Risk Perceptions and the Uses of Mainstream Media and WeChat", *SSM – Population Health* 23 (September 2023), DOI: 10.1016/j.ssmph.2023.101467. The figures can only provide a certain orientation. They are estimates, as the extensive monitoring system was no longer fully functional during these dramatic developments.

67 See Ruihua Li et al., "The Negative Impact of Loneliness and Perceived Stress on Mental Health during Two-months Lockdown in Shanghai", *Journal of Affective Disorders* 335 (August 2023): 377 – 82, DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2023.05.055.

68 In some cases, the supply of food could no longer be guaranteed. By way of example, a report with protests by residents who shouted their frustration into the "night" can be found here: "Inside Shanghai's Food Shortage Crisis Amid Covid Lockdowns", *The Wall Street Journal* (online), n. d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usga_TymN7s (accessed 1 August 2024).

69 Many journalists were themselves victims of the lockdown and were barely able to conduct research outside of their place of residence. As a result, the tone of reporting also became harsher. See for example Philipp Mattheis, "Chinas Zero-Covid-Totalitarismus", *Cicero*, 14 April 2022, <https://www.cicero.de/aussenpolitik/lockdown-in-shanghai-chinas-zero-covid-totalitarismus> (accessed 1 August 2024).

ships in front of the city’s harbour, which made it particularly difficult to clear and transport goods.

Most German companies in Shanghai were also in a complete or partial lockdown.⁷⁰ Although the vulnerability of supply chains and the resulting supply bottlenecks during the pandemic were a global phenomenon (and still are so today due to the war in Ukraine), the shutdown in Shanghai became a symbol of German industry’s dependence on China. The industrial policy strategy published by the Federal Ministry of Economics and Climate Protection (BMWK) in October 2023 still states: “For example, more than 80% of the laptops and more than 90% of the photovoltaic systems sold in Germany originate from China. Such dependencies tend not to be seen as a problem whilst the supply chain works. But when it is disrupted, it is impossible to find alternative suppliers at short notice. This became clear for example when, during the pandemic, a long-lasting lockdown in the port city of Shanghai impacted industrial output in Germany because the upstream products were not arriving.”⁷¹

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine also revealed the unpredictability of authoritarian regimes. German policymakers were made acutely aware of what the dependence on energy imports from Russia meant. The German government’s efforts to ensure energy security beyond Moscow and generally counter the negative effects of connectivity with Russia have been a completely new experience for German politics since the end of the East-West conflict. The focus shifted to securing supply chains, economic relations, critical infrastructure and access to raw materials. Under the motto “We must not make the same mistake again”, the far more extensive dependencies of the German economy on China very quickly came into focus.⁷²

70 “Maschinenbau: Lockdowns in China hinterlassen Spuren”, *Produktion* (online), 10 May 2022, <https://www.produktion.de/wirtschaft/lockdowns-in-china-hinterlassen-spuren-im-maschinenbau-800.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

71 Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK), ed., *Industrial Policy in Changed Times. Safeguarding Our Industrial Base, Renewing Our Prosperity, Boosting Our Economic Security* (Berlin, October 2023), 13, <https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/EN/Publikationen/Industry/industrial-policy-in-changing-times.html> (accessed 7 August 2024).

72 Annalena Baerbock in conversation with Stephan Detjen, “Besorgnis wegen möglicher Invasion Chinas in Taiwan”, *Deutschlandfunk*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/annalena-baerbock-china-taiwan->

The China policy of Germany’s traffic light coalition moves on a fluctuating spectrum ranging from too much protection to just enough.

Two decisions exemplify the spectrum of the dependency debate: firstly, the compromise on the participation of the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) in the Tollerort Container Terminal (CTT) of Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG (HHLA) in late 2022, and secondly, the decision on a factory of the chip manufacturer Elmos following an investment review process. In November 2022 the German government prevented the takeover of the Elmos factory by a Chinese investor. These examples show how differently the threat posed to Germany by Chinese actors is assessed. To a certain extent, they also show that the traffic light coalition’s China policy moves on a fluctuating spectrum ranging from too much to just enough protection.

The 2021 agreement between HHLA and Cosco originally provided for a 35 per cent stake in CTT. This would have allowed Cosco to block decisions affecting Tollerort (blocking minority). Since the summer of 2022, more voices have been critical of the planned project, with the BMWK in particular expressing concerns about HHLA’s plans. Without these interventions, the deadline for the Chancellery to intervene and amend the deal might simply have passed. Ultimately, a compromise was reached in the Federal Cabinet: Cosco ended up with a 24.99 per cent stake in Tollerort and is therefore unable to exert any strategic influence on the HHLA subsidiary CTT. For some, this decision does not go far enough, as it allows the Chinese state to exert influence on critical infrastructure in Germany, particularly with regard to data traffic at the terminal.⁷³ For others, this deal has

tuerkei-syrien-100.html (accessed 1 August 2024). See on critical raw materials Inga Carry, Nadine Godehardt and Melanie Müller, *The Future of European-Chinese Raw Material Supply Chains. Three Scenarios for 2030 and Their Implications*, SWP Comment 27/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2023), DOI: 10.18449/2023C27.

73 For example, Ricarda Lang from Bündnis 90/Die Grünen on X (formerly Twitter) on 26 October 2022, https://x.com/Ricarda_Lang/status/1585233020520665089 (accessed 1 August 2024): “China’s involvement in #HamburgerHafen remains a mistake. Prohibiting the Cosco deal would have been the right way to protect our critical infrastructure. Because this was blocked by the Chancellery, the restriction to 24.9% is necessary damage limitation.”

nothing to do with a “sell-out of the Port of Hamburg”.⁷⁴ HHLA emphasises that no strategic expertise will be lost and that the cooperation between HHLA and Cosco will not create any one-sided dependencies.

The discussions surrounding Cosco’s investment in the Port of Hamburg illustrate that dependence on China was cited on the one hand as a reason against the investment and on the other hand as an argument in favour of concluding the contract, as the potential risk was not great enough to stop the deal completely. Dependencies are clearly interpreted in a situation-specific way, which also highlights the different points of view in the traffic light coalition. In other words, it is difficult to generalise when dependencies constitute a risk — why and for whom. At best, the direct exclusion of Chinese investors in certain sectors would be conceivable, i.e. a blanket securitisation of entire policy areas and a clear commitment to considering China a comprehensive threat. As long as decisions remain case-specific, other contextual factors will always play a role. This was demonstrated by the sale of the Elmos factory, which was prohibited by the German government. The reason given in this case was that “the acquisition would have jeopardised Germany’s public order and security”. Economics Minister Robert Habeck also emphasised: “Particularly in the semiconductor sector, it is important for us to protect the technological and economic sovereignty of Germany and Europe.”⁷⁵ This view is not shared by all experts.⁷⁶

Context and timing played a decisive role in both the first and second case: with regard to the Port of Hamburg, Olaf Scholz’s political past in Hamburg and his planned first trip to China as Federal Chancellor;

in connection with the Elmos factory, above all the US government’s decision at the beginning of October 2022 to introduce export controls on semiconductor technology (and artificial intelligence) to China.⁷⁷

China policy positions in the Bundestag and the Federal Government

The above-mentioned developments are also reflected in the significant increase in China-related debates in the German Bundestag since the 19th parliamentary term (2018–2021).⁷⁸ This underlines the fact that political awareness of the changes in China under Xi and their impact on Germany and Europe was already pronounced before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In the case of China-related plenary sessions where the agenda contains the words “China”, “Chinese”, “Taiwan” or “Hong Kong”, the peak can already be seen in 2020 with 17 relevant sessions (see Figure 1, p. 22). Since then, the number has remained constant at a high level: eleven in 2021, ten each in 2022 and 2023 and already six by mid-May 2024.⁷⁹

This trend is also evident in the committee meetings (agenda includes “China” or “Chinese”), especially in the Foreign Affairs and Humanitarian Aid and Human Rights Committees (see Figure 2, p. 23). The highest values for these are also found in 2020, followed by a slight dip in 2021. Since then, the number of “China topics” has stabilised at a high level. It is also interesting to look at the development of minor interpellations, which, as a parliamentary control

⁷⁴ Lars Klingbeil, quoted in “SPD-Chef Klingbeil sieht keinen Ausverkauf des Hamburger Hafens”, *Spiegel Online*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/spd-chef-klingbeil-sieht-keinen-ausverkauf-des-hamburger-hafens-a-b356bd0f-db2f-4304-8e4f-dabc481a006d> (accessed 1 August 2024).

⁷⁵ See the BMWK press release on this matter: “Chipfabrik Elmos darf nicht an chinesischen Investor verkauft werden — Bundeskabinett untersagt Verkauf” (Berlin, 9 November 2022), <https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Pressemitteilunggen/2022/11/20221109-chipfabrik-elmos-darf-nicht-an-chinesischen-investor-verkauft-werden.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

⁷⁶ See the brief analysis by technology expert Jan-Peter Kleinhans on X (formerly Twitter) as of 8 November 2022, <https://x.com/JPKleinhans/status/1589977020083363841> (accessed 1 August 2024).

⁷⁷ This is an example of how Germany’s China policy must always be considered in conjunction with transatlantic relations and the Sino-American rivalry. This is not a causality, but a further context, which is not the focus of this analysis. On this topic, see for example Sebastian Biba, “Germany’s Relation with the United States and China from a Strategic Triangle Perspective”, *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (November 2021): 1905–24, DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiab170.

⁷⁸ See Roderick Kefferpütz and Barbara Pongratz, *China-Politik verankern: Die unterschätzte Rolle des Bundestags bei der Gestaltung deutsch-chinesischer Beziehungen* (Berlin: MERICS, 8 December 2022), <https://merics.org/de/studie/china-politik-verankern-die-unterschaetzte-rolle-des-bundestags-bei-der-gestaltung-deutsch> (accessed 1 August 2024). The results of this analysis are based on the author’s own surveys and analyses of the agenda in the German Bundestag.

⁷⁹ By comparison, there were only four China-related meetings in the entire 18th parliamentary term.

Figure 1

Plenary meetings of the German Bundestag regarding China, 2014–2024

Agenda comprises “China”, “Chinese”, “Taiwan” or “Hong Kong”*



*Includes oral inquiries, negotiations of proposals, and referral to relevant committees.

Contributions to debates on China without an agenda item were not counted.

Source: bundestag.de

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instrument, are often an indicator of the political explosiveness of topics and at the same time reflect the spectrum of views on an issue in the Bundestag. Here, the peak of 19 China-related questions was in 2023, i.e. during the term of the coalition government (see Figure 3, p. 24).

In terms of content, a key lesson from the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine appears to be the view that strategic dependencies in relations with China must be reduced. This is reflected not only in the German government’s Strategy on China published in July 2023, but also in position papers on China policy published in advance by the FDP parliamentary group (February 2023) and the CDU/CSU parliamentary group (April 2023). The debate on the direction that the Strategy on China should take, but above all the leak of an early version of the paper in November 2022, noticeably revitalised discussions in the political factions in the Bundestag. In addition to the FDP and CDU/CSU parliamentary groups, the SPD parliamentary group has also thoroughly reconsidered its stance on China, albeit mostly in the context of the global *Zeitenwende*. This is evident, for example, in the policy paper of the Commission on International Policy (KIP) from January 2023, in which China is only one topic among many. However, the paper emphasises the need for Germany to define its

own strengths and insists that “the economy must be made more resilient, one-sided dependencies reduced and partnerships diversified”.⁸⁰

The parliamentary papers of the FDP⁸¹ and CDU/CSU⁸² as well as the German government’s China

⁸⁰ Kommission Internationale Politik (KIP) of the SPD, *Social democratic responses to a world in upheaval* (Berlin, 20 January 2023), 5, https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/internationale_politik/20230120_KIP_en.pdf (accessed 1 August 2024). Within the SPD, the more economically orientated Seeheimer Circle also published a paper on China in April 2023. Dealing with the country is described here as “one of our key challenges in economic policy”. Reducing dependencies by strengthening and securing the German and European markets, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, is the main topic of the paper. See Seeheimer Circle, *Für einen mehrdimensionalen wirtschaftspolitischen Umgang mit China*, Seeheimer Strategiepapier (April 2023), 1, https://www.seeheimer-kreis.de/fileadmin/data/documents/20230416_Seeheim_Strategiepapier_Wirtschaft_China.pdf (accessed 1 August 2024).

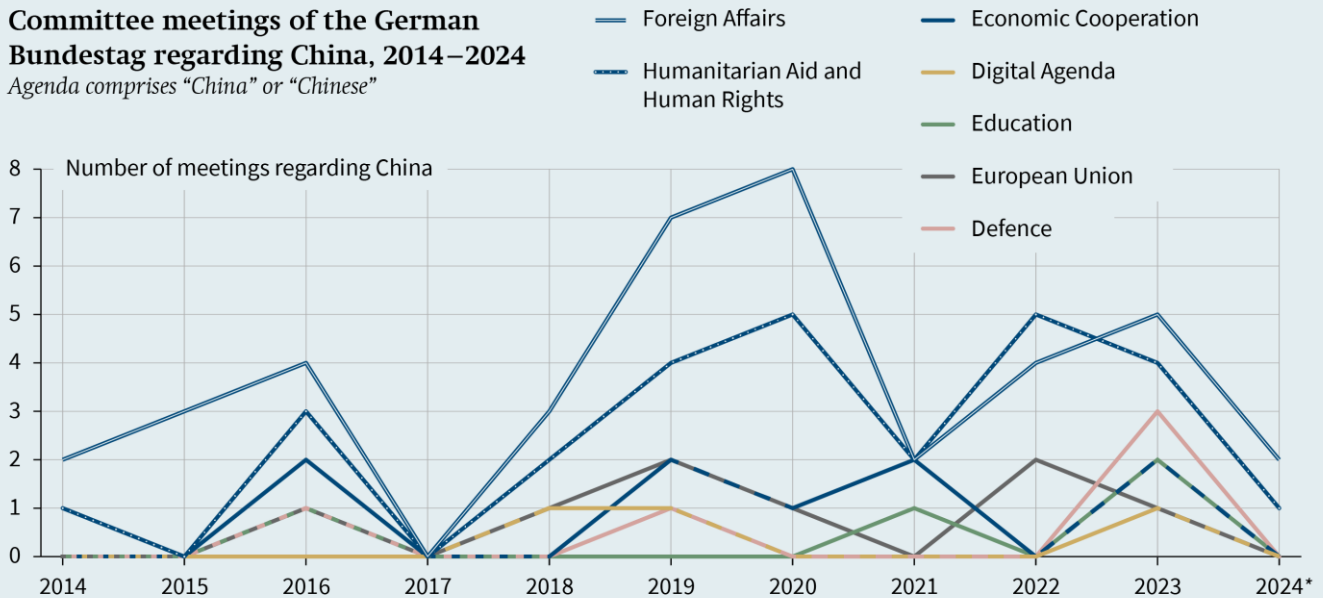
⁸¹ Parliamentary Group of the Free Democrats in the German Bundestag, *Positionspapier der FDP-Fraktion zur China-Strategie* (Berlin, February 2023), <https://www.fdpbt.de/sites/default/files/2023-02/Positionspapier%20zur%20China-Strategie.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024) [hereinafter FDPStrat].

⁸² CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, *Souveränität aus eigener Stärke – Eckpfeiler einer neuen China-*

Figure 2

Committee meetings of the German Bundestag regarding China, 2014–2024

Agenda comprises “China” or “Chinese”



*Data to mid-May 2024.

Source: bundestag.de

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Strategy⁸³ at times employ very similar argumentation. The changes in China under Xi Jinping are usually the starting point. These are said to be the decisive reason why Germany’s China policy must change as well. As correct as this statement is, the causal relationship that it (like the Strategy on China) presents does harbour risks. Firstly, the question arises as to whether German politicians generally only act reactively towards Chinese behaviour and whether German policy only changes when China changes. Secondly, it is unclear how Germany’s China policy must change and what it wants to achieve. How should China change? Is it a question of changing its behaviour or, more fundamentally, of changing the regime? There is often a direct link between the behaviour of political actors and the political constitution of a state. Consequently, it remains unclear what precisely is meant here and to what extent the

desire for regime change in China has guided the authors of the China Strategy, at least implicitly – and despite the long-standing but failed efforts to influence China’s political development in the direction of a Western liberal democratisation of the country.

This argument is reinforced by the lessons learnt from the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which are also addressed in the various China papers. These emphasise that systemic competition between autocracies and democracies must be taken seriously, which is why systemic rivalry is increasingly becoming the focus of relations with China. Unlike the China Strategy, however, the parliamentary group papers are much more direct in their choice of words when it comes to the threat or comprehensive challenge that China poses to Germany and Europe. For the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, for example, the “rise of Communist China is the key epochal challenge of the 21st century” (CDU/CSU Council, p. 3). It goes on to say that China is developing into “the greatest challenge since the end of the Soviet era, including ideologically” (CDU/CSU Council, p. 5). The image of comprehensive systemic competition with China is therefore the starting point for the way in which Germany should deal with the country in the future. Similarly in the FDP paper: “We are in a new

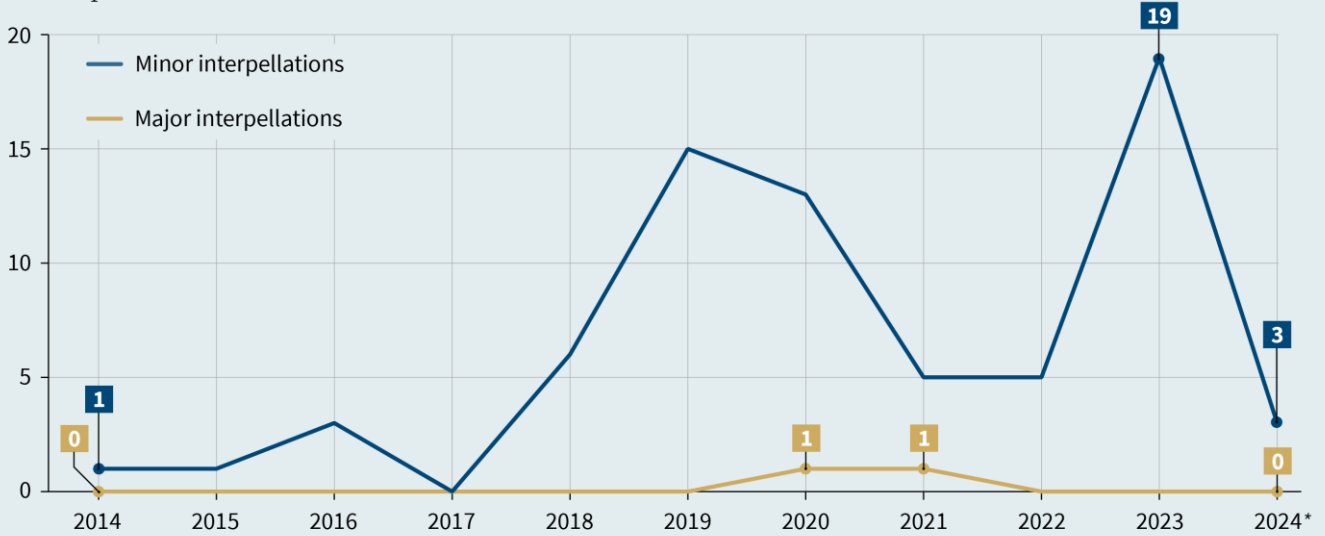
Politik, Positionspapier der CDU/CSU-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag (Berlin, 18 April 2023, <https://www.cducusu.de/sites/default/files/2023-04/PP%20Eckpfeiler%20China-Politik%20neu.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024) [hereinafter CDU/CSU Council].

⁸³ Federal Foreign Office, ed., *Strategy on China* (Berlin, 2023), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2608580/49d50fecc479304c3da2e2079c55e106/china-strategie-enda.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024) [hereinafter ChinStrat].

Figure 3

Minor and major interpellations in the German Bundestag regarding China, 2014–2024

Title comprises “China” or “Chinese”



*Data to mid-May 2024.

Source: bundestag.de

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systemic competition [...] We must not repeat the factor that made us so vulnerable to Putin in our energy dependency: underestimating the challenge” (FDPStrat, p. 1).

What is interesting here is the transfer of causality from Russia to China. The recurring reference that China – in contrast to Russia – represents a “comprehensive” (CDU/CSU Council, p. 27) challenge and that the circumstances are “more complex” (FDP Council, p. 12) also emphasises that the threat posed by China is understood to be much more far-reaching. An extremely important aspect for both the CDU/CSU and the FDP is that China under Xi systematically undermines the existing rules-based order with its values, in particular human rights and civil liberties. Furthermore, the systemic rivalry between China and Germany/Europe is being fuelled by the changes in policy under Xi. While the CDU/CSU calls for a “Zeitenwende in Germany’s China policy” (CDU/CSU Council, p. 12), the FDP even speaks of the need to implement a “deterrence policy towards the People’s Republic of China” (FDP Council, p. 4).

The Strategy on China remains much more moderate in its wording and was drafted much more in the spirit of the European triad of 2019. For the German government, China remains a partner, competitor and systemic rival. The fact that “elements of rivalry

and competition in our relationship have increased in recent years” is mentioned rather cautiously (ChinStrat, p. 11). However, the Strategy also emphasises that cooperation with China on fair terms is a “fundamental element of the Strategy on China”.⁸⁴ Here, China represents more of a challenge than an (existential) threat.

The central theme in all papers is the realisation that dependencies on China must be reduced. This is an *objective* but not a *goal* for German-Chinese relations. In other words: It remains unclear where this realisation will lead and what vision it harbours for Sino-German relations in the longer term. The rough direction of policy, i.e. how exactly dependency is to be reduced, was formulated similarly in all the papers.⁸⁵ What is striking is the emphasis on the idea of securing and expanding one’s own (national and European) strength. The answers therefore focus

⁸⁴ The European triad is dealt with very differently in the papers of the parliamentary groups: It is always present in the SPD paper, but only indirectly in the CDU/CSU’s, with the policy of de-risking taking centre stage. The FDP paper uses the reverse order of the triad so that rivalry is given more weight.

⁸⁵ The fact that there are differences in specific aspects is due, among other things, to the different types of documents and specific party-political views.

mainly on domestic policy; overarching goals for future dealings with China are rarely mentioned.⁸⁶ As summarised in the CDU/CSU paper: “Sovereignty begins with one’s own strength at home – there must be no Strategy on China without a Germany strategy” (CDU/CSU Council, p. 6).⁸⁷ It is also clear that developing sovereignty in key economic and technological areas, diversifying supply chains and improving economic framework conditions are seen as part of maintaining national security. Consequently, the demand for change in dealing with China reinforces the securitisation of various policy areas – at least in the position papers of the FDP and CDU/CSU.

The Strategy on China also emphasises domestic orientation and the safeguarding of national interests and values.⁸⁸ It aims to “to present means and instruments by which the Federal Government can work with China, without endangering Germany’s free and democratic way of life, our sovereignty and prosperity, as well as our security and partnerships with others” (ChinStrat, p. 9, Aim3). The Strategy also aims to provide an inventory of relations (ChinStrat, p. 9, Aim 1), raise awareness in all departments of the complexity of the China challenge and set the framework for a coherent China policy (ChinStrat, p. 9, Aim 2 and 4).

It is clear that the Strategy on China is first and foremost a “strategy for Germany” with a clear focus on Germany’s security and self-protection.⁸⁹ However, the goals listed in the strategy are actually *objectives* and not *aims*.⁹⁰ This difference highlights a problem

⁸⁶ The closest any party comes to a clear goal for relations with China is the FDP, which refers to a “strategic and coordinated deterrence policy” (FDPStrat [see note 81], 4).

⁸⁷ Elsewhere the paper states: “Our agenda strengthens our own capacities, counters the Chinese quest for technological leadership and reduces dependencies in strategically important goods” (CDU/CSU Council [see note 82], 23). In the FDP paper, a sub-chapter is directly titled “Identifying and capitalising on strengths” (FDPStrat [see note 81], 7).

⁸⁸ See ChinStrat (see note 83), 10: “Our aim is to strengthen the resilience of our society, economy and scientific community while preserving the openness of our system.”

⁸⁹ The fourth chapter of the Strategy on China (see note 83) is entirely dedicated to “Strengthening Germany and the EU”.

⁹⁰ The English translation of the Strategy on China refers to “aims”. In English, however, “aim” or “goal” stand for a longer-term, overarching target. “Objectives” is a more concrete and detailed term and tends to stand for sub-goals or instruments that are necessary to achieve a goal. In German, everything can be equally translated as “Ziel”.

with the Strategy: It does not mention any longer-term or overarching goal for relations with China, but does mention a whole series of sub-goals that primarily support self-protection. This is a relatively reactive approach, especially in comparison to the more proactive tendency towards securitisation in the position papers of the FDP and CDU/CSU parliamentary groups. Overall, the Strategy on China is therefore formulated more cautiously. It is recognisably a compromise paper by all ministries and the Federal Chancellery and at the same time represents the lowest common denominator of the coalition’s China policy.

A central component of the safeguarding policy is the minimisation of economic risks, in particular when dealing with China (*de-risking*). According to the Strategy on China, this means “reducing dependencies in critical areas, keeping geopolitical aspects in mind when taking economic decisions, and increasing our resilience” (ChinStrat, p. 34). In retrospect, this approach is increasingly crystallising as another important sub-goal of the Strategy on China – even if it was not formulated as such.

De-risking is an idea adopted from the EU Commission. The fourth chapter of the German government’s Strategy on China sets out the framework and policy areas in which de-risking is to be implemented. The embedding in EU policy is most evident here, but it does not go very far in terms of content – at least in the China Strategy. For example, embedding is about modernising industrial policy (in Germany and the EU), integrating the green transformation into economic processes, strengthening research and innovation (ChinStrat, Chapter 4.1.), diversifying supply chains, especially for critical raw materials (ChinStrat, Chapter 4.2.), and very generally about technological sovereignty, for example by promoting the European chip law (which came into force as an EU regulation on 21 September 2023). There are also very open formulations on the uncertainties of the Chinese market for German and European companies, the implementation of defensive trade instruments at EU level (protection of the EU internal market), the revision of investment screening law and the expansion of export control regimes. Finally, the Federal Government emphasises the increased protection of critical infrastructures against hybrid threats and those from cyberspace.⁹¹

⁹¹ The 64-page Strategy on China also focuses on international instruments of protection, including, for example, the establishment and expansion of global partnerships or

De-risking and the economic security of Europe and Germany

The de-risking approach marked the central content of EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s keynote speech on China at the end of March 2023.⁹² De-risking is a European response to the discussions on *decoupling* from China that took place during the first Trump administration.⁹³ Rhetorically, the emphasis on minimising risks (*de-risking*) defuses the linguistic radicalism of separation that decoupling implies. De-risking expresses the complexity of relations with China, so to speak, and does not paint the black-and-white picture that Donald Trump’s policy of de-coupling suggests.⁹⁴ Furthermore, de-risking describes a change in orientation of Europe’s China policy. It leads away from the rather static and ambivalent view of China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival and towards an operational approach of how relations with China can be managed in an area that is highly relevant to the EU and how changes in the country can be countered. This approach was further elaborated with the adoption of the EU Strategy for Economic Security in June 2023 and the concrete proposals of the EU Commission in January 2024.

In her keynote speech, von der Leyen initially differentiated between *de-risking through diplomacy* and

the diversification of economic relations. It also emphasises several more general elements of German foreign policy, in particular its ties to international, multilateral organisations (World Trade Organisation, United Nations). What is striking is the very narrow positioning with regard to China’s global initiatives, especially the justification for not participating in them, although this does not exclude cooperation in certain policy areas from the outset. This also reflects the ambivalence of Germany’s China policy.

⁹² European Commission, “Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China Relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre”, 30 March 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063 (accessed 1 August 2024).

⁹³ This referred primarily to the impact of the trade war; see Chad P. Bown, *Four Years into the Trade War, Are the US and China Decoupling?* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 20 October 2022), <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/four-years-trade-war-are-us-and-china-decoupling> (accessed 1 August 2024).

⁹⁴ Ursula von der Leyen makes this explicit in her speech: “I believe it is neither viable – nor in Europe’s interest – to decouple from China. Our relations are not black or white – and our response cannot be either. This is why we need to focus on de-risk – not de-couple” (von der Leyen [see note 92]).

economic de-risking. The first approach emphasises the EU’s continued interest in exchange and cooperation with China, for example on climate change issues. At the same time, von der Leyen makes it clear that the EU will represent its positions to the Chinese government openly and clearly and will not hide differences of opinion but will address them confidently.

Economic de-risking, the second path, has four pillars: The first is strengthening the EU economy and industry, for example via the European Critical Raw Materials Act, which aims to ensure greater independence of the EU in raw materials. The second is to make better use of existing trade instruments, such as investment and export controls. Thirdly, according to von der Leyen, the China policy requires the further development of defensive instruments in critical areas such as quantum computing, robotics and artificial intelligence. In all these areas, foreign investment is seen as a security risk, which is why the EU has developed the Economic Security Strategy. The fourth pillar of de-risking is coordination with partners on the topic of economic security. This can be done by adopting further trade agreements within the framework of the G7 or G20, but also by implementing the Global Gateway Strategy, with which the EU supports infrastructure projects in developing and emerging countries.

Accordingly, economic security is moving to the centre of de-risking in the EU. The publication of the strategy of the same name in June 2023 and the five concrete proposals to strengthen economic security in the EU from January 2024 underline this objective. In summary, the strategy is about *fostering* the EU’s competitiveness (*promoting*), expanding economic security (*protecting*) and identifying trustworthy partners to ensure compliance with international rules, the protection of multilateral institutions and sustainable development (*partnering*).⁹⁵

The wording of the German government’s Strategy on China is strongly orientated towards the EU strategy for economic security.

While Chinese activities and the change in Chinese policy under Xi Jinping may have been the reason to

⁹⁵ European Commission, “An EU Approach to Enhance Economic Security”, press release (Brussels, 20 June 2023 [updated]), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_23_3358 (accessed 19 August 2024).

push ahead with policy in this area, the EU Commission remains true to itself in that the content and measures in the strategy for economic security are not formulated to be country-specific. And yet this strategy reads like a continuation of von der Leyen's keynote speech on European-Chinese relations. This is also evident in the five proposals mentioned above. The plan includes improving the screening of foreign investment in the EU; advancing European coordination on export controls; consultations between EU member states on possible risks that may arise due to investment in third countries; promoting research and development in the field of technologies that fulfil both civilian and military purposes; and finally, drawing up recommendations to improve research security.⁹⁶

The publication of the EU strategy one month before the publication of the German Strategy on China (July 2023) has visibly influenced the wording of the latter. Germany's (and Europe's) self-protection and self-preservation are at the forefront. The focus is on reaction, adaptation and security. At its core, Germany's Strategy on China is strongly orientated towards the diplomatic language of the EU – at least in its choice of words.

⁹⁶ European Commission, "Commission Proposes New Initiatives to Strengthen Economic Security", press release (Brussels, 24 January 2024), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_363 (accessed 1 August 2024).

Principles of Germany's China Policy

Germany's China policy in the *Zeitenwende* is characterised by certain principles of action, namely self-protection and political indifference. That is the conclusion of the present analysis. From a methodological point of view, such principles of action organise or typify the empirical facts examined. Consequently, self-protection and political indifference stand for principles that structure Germany's China policy behaviour, but do not exactly reflect reality in all its facets. Based on the ideal type described by Max Weber, principles of action can be viewed both abstractly and in an idealised way; they provide an overview in a chaotic and complex world.⁹⁷ They thus orientate this study with regard to the direction of Germany's China policy. Self-protection is more inward-looking ("safeguarding the political system"), while political indifference is more outward-looking ("the way of dealing with China"). Both principles are linked by a reactive element.

The conclusion that self-protection and political indifference are the guiding principles of Germany's current China policy is based on analyses of German Bundestag debates relevant to China and text analyses of documents relevant to China policy from the parliamentary groups in the Bundestag. A particular focus has been the German government's Strategy on China published in 2023.

⁹⁷ Max Weber's essay on the "objectivity" of sociological and socio-political knowledge states: "It [the ideal type] is an image of thought which is not historical reality or even the 'actual' reality, which is much less there to serve as a schema into which reality should be categorised as a specimen, but which has the meaning of a purely ideal boundary concept by which reality is measured to clarify certain significant components of its empirical content, with which it is compared." Max Weber, "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis", in idem, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 7th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 146–214 (194).

Self-protection and securitisation

Securitisation is an established political science concept that was presented as early as 1998 by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, all three representatives of the so-called Copenhagen School.⁹⁸ Similar to the term *soft power* introduced by the US political scientist Joseph Nye or neo-realist ideas about polarity (such as uni-, bi- or multipolarity), the concept of securitisation is also frequently used in political debates today – although the complexity of the respective theoretical background is often reduced.

In politics, securitisation refers to the process in which an issue (e.g. refugee policy) is turned into a security problem ("All Islamic refugees are Islamists") by a political actor due to a specific event (e.g. an Islamist terrorist attack).⁹⁹ This often leads to the fear that the security problem cannot be solved without radical adaptation or policy change. In this way, securitisation can spread to other policy areas (education policy, social policy, etc.). Following this logic, anything can become a security problem simply by linking a certain situation with a certain event. And with reference to this very fact, specific policies can then be presented as having no alternative.

The theory-led debate on securitisation focuses more strongly on how security is created, and which measures can legitimise the process of securitisation and how. Central to this was initially the idea that the very articulation of a fact changes action or represents an action – in line with John L. Austin's speech act theory. According to Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, this means: "When a securitising actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is 'normal politics', we

⁹⁸ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis* (London, 1998).

⁹⁹ This highly simplified example serves to clarify the argument.

have a case of securitisation.”¹⁰⁰ Securitisation is therefore preceded by the naming of an existential threat (for example, China as an epochal challenge) that can no longer be countered by normal means. Such a situation justifies extraordinary means for self-preservation or self-protection – this also implies a radical change in policy (a “Zeitenwende in China policy”, as called for by the CDU/CSU, or the “necessity of a deterrence policy towards China”, as stated in the FDP position paper).

In the broader academic debate on securitisation, it is important that the articulation of security problems cannot be seen in isolation from the context (for example, the increasing fragility of the international liberal order) and that the context is also changed by the attribution of an existential threat.¹⁰¹ In other words: If German politicians were to describe China under Xi as *the* central challenge for Germany and the EU, then in terms of the theory this would not only have an impact on how to deal with China, but it would ultimately change the context of relations, the character of the world order (for example, in terms of thinking more in terms of political blocs, such as democracies versus autocracies, or of the increasing fragility of established international institutions).

Self-protection, on the other hand, is not an established concept in political science and yet – especially when differentiated from securitisation – is a more appropriate term for characterising Germany’s China policy. In analytical terms, self-protection and securitisation must be considered separately, although they are basically one spectrum on which policy can be located. Decisions in Germany’s China policy at times point more in one direction, at times more in the other. In other words: Self-protection is a form of securitisation, but on a much smaller scale.

The focus of a self-protection policy is on maintaining and safeguarding the country’s domestic system.

For example, China is not seen as an all-encompassing threat to Germany in the context of self-protection. If this were the case, it would clearly accelerate a process of extensive securitisation. As in the US Congress, China would then dominate all debates and legitimise many political decisions. In a policy of self-protection, however, the significance of the facts always remains somewhat vague. This is shown in Germany’s China policy, where developments in China under Xi were cited as the reason for a necessary political change (“Because China has changed, we have to change the way we deal with China”), and in the fact that the description of what China represents for German policy remains ambivalent (“partner, competitor, rival”). In a broader sense, the focus of a policy of self-protection is therefore not on changing the *other*, on containing or combating a threat by all means, but primarily on maintaining and protecting one’s own system, i.e. the *self*. Safeguarding policy therefore tends to be defensive and protectionist in nature. In contrast to comprehensive securitisation, it is a reactive – not active – adaptation policy.¹⁰²

Self-protection as a weak form of securitisation is always associated with risks, especially as a principle of Germany’s China policy. There is a risk that decision-makers will tend to formulate negative goals. These would increasingly be about prevention, protection or security. Moreover, negative goals are usually very specific. With increasing securitisation, this can lead to each additional negative goal being legitimised by a specific circumstance, for example with changes in China – in the sense of: “China is changing (further), therefore we must change our policy (further).”¹⁰³

100 Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, *Security* (see note 98), 24f.

101 Thierry Balzacq refers to this type of securitisation as a sociological reading of securitisation. He also emphasises the active role of the addressee (e.g. the Bundestag or the public), which cannot be ignored. Securitisation is dependent on the relationship between speaker and audience. See Thierry Balzacq, “The ‘Essence’ of Securitisation: Theory, Ideal Type, and a Sociological Science of Security”, *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (March 2015): 103 – 13, DOI: 10.1177/0047117814526606b.

102 See on the discussion of adaptation, especially the increase in “reactive practices of structural adaptation”, Philipp Staab, *Anpassung. Leitmotiv der nächsten Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022). Staab argues that we no longer live in an age of progress, but one of adaptation. This requires active agency and passive reaction.

103 The point here is not to contradict the fact that there are indeed developments in China that are relevant for Germany and the EU and that need to be responded to. Rather, the focus is on the momentum of securitisation, which always harbours the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, because the political decision of one side

As a result, this can mean that the actual problem – China under Xi – fades into the background, as the realisation of the negative political goal appears more important. The issue thus becomes a narrative that is used to generate arguments or advantages on detailed domestic political issues (e.g. the “debt trap”) and less on China. This can sometimes lead to misjudgements regarding the need to structurally develop and expand China knowledge and China expertise, i.e. in the relevant political institutions and in the administration.

Example: Industrial policy in the Zeitenwende

The BMWK's strategy paper on industrial policy published in October 2023¹⁰⁴ is an example of how “China and the Zeitenwende” is used to justify specific positions and changes in the direction of German industrial policy. It makes it clear how the myth of the global Zeitenwende, and in particular the focus on China, can be or is used by decision-makers to push through certain interests or goals, in this case economic policy. The geopolitical turning point – particularly with regard to China – is the first of three central challenges mentioned in the strategy paper in connection with Germany as an industrial location.

The point here is not the accuracy (or not) of the statements, but the fluidity of the transition between a policy of self-protection and a progressive securitisation of political processes. It also shows the benefits that a strategic narrative (“global Zeitenwende” and “China”) can unfold in (domestic) political discourse, for example by presenting certain consequences as having no alternative.

It is striking, for example, that in the BMWK paper, China's claim to technological leadership is based on the Made-in-China 2025 strategy, which was already eight years old at the time of publication. Only now the effects of Chinese industrial policy (“the return of geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects, unleashing their full impact on economic policy.”) have been fully recognised as a huge challenge – if not a threat – for Germany as a business location. Consequently, the paper states: “As a result, Made in China 2025 aims to replace foreign suppliers on the Chinese market.” At

can always trigger counter-reactions on the other side, and because political decisions never only work in one direction.

104 Here and in the following: BMWK, *Industrial Policy in Changed Times* (see note 71).

the same time, it emphasises that China under Xi – similar to Russia – is “aiming to create economic and technological dependencies so that it can go on to exploit these in order to enforce its political goals and interests” (p. 12). The strategy paper concludes that becoming “overdependent on single sources of intermediate products or forward-looking technologies or on specific markets” (p. 13) should be avoided. The risks of supply chain disruptions and dependence on mineral raw materials are emphasised against the backdrop of China's strength.

The aim is to recognise the risks that arise from this, particularly for Germany as an export nation, as well as the increasing link between economic interdependence and geopolitics.¹⁰⁵ This is the global framework in which the industrial strategy is placed and beyond which further challenges are identified and much more detailed proposals are made for safeguarding the German (and European) market. This is a deliberately broad scope and emphasises once again how the issue of China can be used strategically in other contexts and for other objectives to justify its significance for German policy, and particularly a change in current policy.

Political indifference as a principle of Germany's China policy

Analysing the various China texts, but above all the German government's Strategy on China, reveals

105 This is also reflected in a motion by the CDU/CSU parliamentary group on “Establishing a commission to review security-related economic relations between Germany and China” from November 2023. The connection between the economy, security, China and geopolitics was also the driving force here. The aim was to set up a commission made up primarily of experts, which would be tasked with presenting Parliament with options for action within a year to improve the security and reliability of value chains and investments between the two countries. The motion was rejected. In the plenary debate on 17 May 2024, Dr Franziska Brantner, Parliamentary State Secretary at the BMWK, referred to the relevant activities of the Federal Government: “You [referring to Jens Spahn] have written down specific points, and it is good that you have done so. Large parts of them we have not only addressed but already processed.” The aspect that a commission would also create more knowledge about China in Parliament was pushed into the background in the plenary debate; see Deutscher Bundestag, *Plenarprotokoll 20/170* (Berlin, 17 May 2024), 21987, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/20/20170.pdf> (accessed 2 August 2024).

another principle of Germany's China policy: political indecisiveness or political indifference. In many respects, this is an unexplored concept within political science. It characterises political actors who consciously choose not to make a decision on certain political issues. In other words, they are in favour of choice, ambivalence and against committing to just one alternative.

This indifference policy must be clearly distinguished from associative or dissociative policy.¹⁰⁶ The first variant refers primarily to a politics of cooperation. The starting point is Hannah Arendt's idea that political action can only take place in the plurality of the public sphere.¹⁰⁷ Associative politics is therefore based on interrelationships and communication. It can serve different purposes, but the focus is on friendly interaction as a basic prerequisite for political association.¹⁰⁸ Dissociative politics is based on a certain antagonism, i.e. a political community is directed, for example, against an external opponent or, in Carl Schmitt's terms, against a public enemy.¹⁰⁹ The attribution of partners (friends) or opponents (enemies) characterises this political strategy, which entails a conflictual view of politics. Put simply, the associative and dissociative perspectives establish a conception of politics that is grouped around either cooperation or security.

Indifference politics deliberately positions itself outside of this logic; instead, it is about leaving options open. This should not be confused with the process of *non-decision making*, which is rather an expression of power and in which an actor, for example,

makes every effort to remove items from the agenda.¹¹⁰ Indifference politics means that actors consciously make a decision against the decision. They remain in-between. However, political actors only become visible and can only be held responsible at the moment of decision, which points to another characteristic of indifference politics. If political actors decide against the decision and in favour of ambivalence, this makes it difficult to clearly assign responsibility; consequently, the accountability of the political actors also remains unclear. Thus, indifference politics stands for a wait-and-see approach and is therefore – like self-protection – reactive.

This can be seen in various areas of Germany's China policy, but most prominently in the fact that it remains unclear exactly what the ultimate goal for German-Chinese relations is. The ambivalence is inherent in Germany's China policy with the constant reference to the 2019 EU strategy paper. China remains a partner, competitor and systemic rival, with "China's conduct and decisions [causing] the elements of rivalry and competition in our relations to increase in recent years" (ChinStrat, p. 11). So there is only a minimal shift. As important as this triad was in 2019, five years later in the Strategy on China it still seems primarily like a subjective assessment and, above all, a static attribution in which it is still not clear which standards apply to the different roles and where they would come from. The impression persists that the attribution of "partner, competitor and rival" mainly helps to organise German domestic policy towards China, whereby the goal of Germany's China policy – or what this ambivalence is intended to achieve – remains unclear.

While this triad and its processing in the German government's current Strategy on China certainly leads to greater sensitivity and awareness with regards to China-related issues (which was also a central intention of the Strategy), it remains questionable whether any operational ambiguity competence can develop from this. In other words: ambivalence alone is not a strategy and does not automatically imply strategic action. Germany's Strategy on China – and consequently also its China policy – therefore lacks a decision in favour of a longer-term goal in relations with China. The triad is thus not superfluous, but it is no

106 See in more detail Nadine Godehardt, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Intertwined Actors in International Relations* (New York, 2013), 60–69.

107 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

108 Associative politics is thus based on Aristotle's understanding of friendship, the different types of which he outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as the author emphasises elsewhere; see Godehardt, *Chinese Constitution of Central Asia* (see note 106), 64: "friendship is not only considered as a perfect friendship that stems from the goodness of people. The political and passionate types of friendship, in fact, show that aspects of conflict, controversies or distrust are constant challenges faced. Friendship does not exclude the potential for rivalries, enmity or even war. After all, friendship can also be dissolved."

109 See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

110 Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework", *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 3 (1963): 632–42, DOI: 10.2307/1952568.

longer appropriate in its current form. The task now is to enhance it, above all through a debate on objectives that does not necessarily have to result in a public strategy.

One danger of political indifference is that different actors end up pursuing only their own interests.

However, the principle of political indifference not only emphasises the ambivalence of Germany's China policy, but also indicates that this ambivalence has been deliberately chosen. This also harbours dangers, for example for the policy of de-risking, which is very much geared towards the management of economic relations with China. The de-risking approach refers both to the sub-goal of reducing risks, particularly in economic relations with China, and to developing the instruments and priorities that are relevant for this. In the European context, the triad is therefore increasingly moving into the background, with de-risking and economic security taking centre stage.

This trend can also be observed to some extent in Germany's China policy. There is a risk that without an overarching or long-term goal for relations with China, de-risking will lose clarity. The actors involved may develop very different ideas of a risk minimisation strategy, which can be quite contradictory. Ambivalence or political indifference can therefore have the ultimate effect of different actors pursuing only their own interests.

Another danger is that the view of China as a partner, competitor and rival prevents rather than promotes necessary structural changes within the federal government and administration. The impression can sometimes be that this triad and the Strategy say everything there is to say about China and that, for example, the strategic development and expansion of China expertise, particularly in the federal government and administration, is not necessary.¹¹¹

111 The Strategy on China makes it clear that no additional resources will be made available for implementation and that corresponding projects will be included "in the relevant ministerial budgets within the federal budget by means of prioritisation" (ChinStrat [see note 83], p. 9). To this end, China policy coordination within the federal government is to be strengthened, but this does not imply any structural changes or the explicit development of China expertise. The Strategy on China therefore remains vague in this context as well.

Another effect of political indifference is the Europeanisation of German China policy. This does not mean the embedding of German China policy in EU China policy, but rather the style of German China policy. As within the EU, responsibilities and competences are being distributed among more and more actors – sometimes necessarily so in the EU, as nation states still have to approve European decisions in their own parliaments in many areas. EU processes are therefore inevitably accompanied by a diffusion of responsibility.

With the coalition government and the adoption of the Strategy on China, responsibility and accountability in German China policy have become much less clear. There are many players at all levels (federal, state and local) in politics, business and society who are (or can be) held responsible for dealing with China. At the same time, because no additional financial resources are being made available for the implementation of Germany's China policy, the topic of China is being integrated more strongly into existing or planned strategies or legislation. Examples include the BMWK's raw materials policy in connection with the European Critical Raw Materials Act, which was adopted in March 2023,¹¹² the Supply Chain Due Diligence Act, which is being implemented under the leadership of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS),¹¹³ and the position paper of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) on research security in light of these changing times.¹¹⁴

112 See European Commission, "European Critical Raw Materials Act", 16 March 2023, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/green-deal-industrial-plan/european-critical-raw-materials-act_en (accessed 2 August 2024); Eliza Gkritsi, "EU Gives Final Green Light to Critical Raw Materials Strategy", *Euractiv*, 18 March 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/circular-economy/news/eu-gives-final-green-light-to-critical-raw-materials-strategy> (accessed 2 August 2024).

113 The law must be revised again due to the stricter EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive adopted in May 2024.

114 In March 2024, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) published a position paper on research security in the new era. The starting point for this was the upheaval in the international order, as stated on the announcement website: "Multipolarity, hybrid threats and systemic rivalry, especially with China, were steadily increasing even before this." The aim is to "harmonise the great good of scientific freedom with security policy interests in international cooperation" and to guarantee "Germany's technological sovereignty". The document refers to Russia's inva-

As a result, many actors and institutions in Germany — from companies, state governments and mayors to universities, research institutes and individual researchers — are being urged to examine their links with Chinese actors and institutions, particularly in terms of China policy.

This makes it clear that China policy is a comprehensive task and cannot simply be decided *top-down*. Everyone must realise the risks involved in dealing with China. This is certainly an important sub-goal that the current German government is trying to achieve. However, this approach harbours risks, as it creates many different responsibilities in dealing with Chinese actors. Particularly in a federal state, the assessment of relations with China can sometimes turn out very differently and, for example, intensify conflicts of interest. It is also problematic that the diffusion of responsibilities and competences creates confusion as to who actually decides on China policy in Germany. The fact that the Strategy on China ultimately does not specify a clear long-term goal for the future of German-Chinese relations makes it more difficult for other actors, for example at the local level, to resolve the dilemma of minimising risks in dealing with China on the one hand and maintaining cooperation with the country on the other.

Example: Effects of political indifference on German-Chinese intermunicipal relationships

The results of an analysis by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) entitled “Municipalities: The key element of Germany's China policy. Developments and Future Prospects”, in which the author participated, once again emphasise the effects of political indifference, especially in a federal state.¹¹⁵ Many decisions in rela-

sion of Ukraine as well as to China. As is the case in the BMWK's industrial strategy document, the usefulness of the global *Zeitenwende* narrative, including the reference to China, can be seen here primarily in pushing through domestic policy changes. See BMBF, “Forschungssicherheit in der *Zeitenwende*” (Berlin, 15 March 2024), <https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/kurzmeldungen/de/2024/03/240311-positionspapier-forschungssicherheit.html> (accessed 2 August 2024).

115 The findings presented in this chapter stem from a three-year research project funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) (2021–2023). The team of experts conducted over 80 interviews, anonymised and analysed them. The focus was on three broadly defined study regions: the Düssel-

tions with China are made primarily by actors at the local level. However, local actors often pursue different interests and goals and are at the same time subject to different administrative constraints than actors at the federal level. Overall, it is noticeable that despite the changes in China under Xi Jinping and Germans' increasing awareness of the risks in dealing with China, local actors still tend to see opportunities, for example in economic or educational cooperation with China. Specific local factors are often decisive here, such as job security through Chinese greenfield investments, favourable options through Chinese bidders in public tenders in information or transport infrastructure (keyword: cost pressure), but also the often long-standing voluntary commitment of individuals and the associated personal connections, sometimes especially in the education sector.

Many of these processes in German-Chinese intermunicipal relationships have existed for decades and are constantly evolving. But it is only in recent years, and particularly as a result of the debate on the German government's Strategy on China, that such local links have increasingly come to the fore. Intermunicipal relationships are increasingly becoming part of geopolitics, as they also reflect the German view of China.¹¹⁶ This also explains the growing political and media attention, which represents an unprecedented challenge for many municipal players. Although these developments have increased awareness of the topic of China in the municipalities, they have also caused uncertainty about the “right” way to deal with China. Against this backdrop, expectations of the federal government's Strategy on China were high at municipal level, as the political responsibility for determining the framework conditions for dealing with China was primarily seen as lying with the federal government. Its political indifference, especially the lack of an overarching goal for dealing with China and the unclear responsibility and accountability in

dorf/Duisburg metropolitan area, the Hanover-Braunschweig-Göttingen-Wolfsburg metropolitan region and the Central German metropolitan region (primarily Saxony/Thuringia). The author was co-leader of the project. Partly taken from: Andrea Frenzel, Nadine Godehardt, Stefan Pantekoek and David Schulze, *Kommunen: Kernstück deutscher China-Politik. Developments and Future Prospects*, FES Study (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, February 2024), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/21026-20240229.pdf> (accessed 2 August 2024).

116 Frenzel, Godehardt, Pantekoek and Schulze, *Kommunen* (see note 115), 2.

Germany's China policy, therefore also has an impact on intermunicipal relationships.

The FES study shows that many municipal representatives had hoped for “more support, guidance and coordination” as well as a “clearer framework for action, institutional structures and greater clarity on the issue of resources”. It also states that it is not clear “how the gap between Berlin's China policy and operational implementation in the municipalities can be overcome, beyond the announcement that China policy issues will be increasingly addressed in the context of regular federal-state talks. [...] The impression is growing that the China policy is already being implemented in a number of other ‘strategies’ and ‘initiatives’ of the federal government, but that the specific situation of the municipalities is not being taken into account here either.”¹¹⁷

117 Ibid., 31.

Conclusions

The following conclusions for Germany's China policy can be drawn from this analysis: Firstly, there needs to be an intensive debate about possible goals for German-Chinese relations. The debate on "goals" has not come to an end with the attribution of "partner, competitor and rival" to China and the shift in political focus to competition and systemic rivalry. The debate should at least be continued internally. As this analysis has shown, the decision in favour of ambivalence is not automatically synonymous with a strategically orientated foreign policy; it is above all a characteristic of political indifference. In other words: Ambivalence is characteristic of a policy that lacks an overarching goal. Political indifference favours a focus on domestic policy issues and the use of the Chinese situation to serve the interests of a wide range of actors in German politics. However, it makes it difficult to discuss how Germany's foreign and China policy relates to the global effects of the *Zeitenwende*, and more specifically which target image should determine German-Chinese relations in the future.

In terms of content, it is noticeable that the triad often primarily organises Germany's domestic policy on China. In discussions between experts and representatives of the Federal Foreign Office about the content of the Strategy on China, for example, it frequently became clear in which areas competition or rivalry with China could be observed. Yet it was difficult to name topics where China is a partner and cooperation could be possible. In most cases, reference was made to cooperation on climate issues or other global challenges and crises in general. The triad without an overarching goal thus prevents thinking and acting *out of the box* in terms of content.

Accordingly, when the German government's National Security Strategy of June 2023¹¹⁸ also states that rivalry and competition with China is evident in the fact that the country "is trying in various ways to remould the existing rules-based international order [...], acting time and again counter to our interests and values" (p. 23), the impression arises that an

exchange on these and related topics — precisely because of the rivalry — is barely possible any more. Against the backdrop of a world that is becoming more multipolar, however, an exchange on the different understandings of order and security is all the more important. For Germany's China policy, this means leaving behind the focus on securing Germany (and Europe) vis-à-vis China to a certain extent and intensifying and even demanding dialogue with China on (hard) security issues and questions of order. This also requires the courage — despite all the dangers and threats — to take a risk, for example to launch the initiative for the establishment of an EU-China Technology and Infrastructure Council (TIC), for which the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) could serve as a model. In addition, serious plans for the organisation of an EU-China conference on security and cooperation as part of an active adjustment policy would be conceivable and sensible.

A debate on the function of the triad for the future goals of German-Chinese relations is urgently needed in view of the constantly changing political context. The current German government is already emphasising the upheaval in the international order with the global *Zeitenwende* and is thus pointing to an increasingly multipolar world, which it is difficult to imagine (or wish) without China. Against this backdrop, an intensive examination of the significance of coexistence in German-Chinese relations would be a suitable starting point for a debate on goals. Coexistence must be rethought. It is about more than a static relationship status between states, blocs or powers in a world that can increasingly be characterised as multipolar.

On the contrary, coexistence enables connectivity between actors without preconditions if there is a willingness to renegotiate common principles of coexistence. For the Chinese side, too, coexistence in the post-Cold War era and in times of a Russian war of aggression in Europe can no longer simply be equated with the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" of 1954. Xi's call to the international community to continue the "Five Principles" under the new political

118 National Security Strategy (see note 13).

circumstances and to build a “community with a shared future for mankind” does not provide enough points of reference.¹¹⁹ Consequently, the concept needs to be revised on all sides, especially as coexistence essentially involves the possibility of allowing friction, conflict and separation without the need for total decoupling. A discussion – even if only internal – about the framework conditions and principles of coexistence could, at best, open up diplomatic spaces to negotiate new rules for global and regional cooperation.

In addition to the debate on goals, a *preparedness* debate is essential, which will then lead to concrete solutions to prepare preventatively and in the best possible way for future dealings with China. This involves strategically (and permanently) relieving the political apparatus within relevant institutions and the administration. This relates particularly to the strategic and permanent development and expansion of China expertise in the administration, which does not have to be renegotiated with every election cycle and should initially be established at federal level. Mandatory “China trainings” could be introduced that prepare bureaucrats for exchanges and meetings with Chinese colleagues. For example, checklists could be drawn up for meetings with Chinese cadres and continuously adapted within the bureaucracy. It is also long overdue for Germany to translate key laws, guidelines and positions relevant to China into Chinese, at least informally and especially for direct dialogue with Chinese decision-makers (keyword: informal handout). This is because many technical terms or specialised legal terms are very difficult for the Chinese side to understand, for example when it comes to the Supply Chain Due Diligence Act. Decoding German policy for the Chinese side should become a part of the established procedure.

With regard to language skills, it is equally relevant that at least the majority of German employees at the German embassy in Beijing should be able to speak Chinese at a good level. In addition, official Chinese policy documents should not be analysed mainly by Chinese employees – also against the background of the changes in China under Xi Jinping. In addition, a person employed at selected German

embassies around the world should analyse and regularly report on the host country’s perspective on China.

Last but not least, the creation of a platform that records all experts and their specific focus on China would be a relief. This would make it easier for politicians and administrators to request expertise in the event of future problems and crisis situations, not only via the existing institutions in Berlin, but throughout Germany and in a targeted manner. A cooperation with the German Association for Asian Studies, for example, would be conceivable here, as it offers a so-called expertise directory that lists members who make their expertise available to the media and public and private institutions. A federal platform could expand this offering with a scientific policy advice section. This would make it easier to quickly put together crisis teams and panels of experts from a pool of scientific personnel, and there would be no need to create a new committee.

Abbreviations

BDI	Federation of German Industries
BMAS	Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
BMBF	Federal Ministry of Education and Research
BMWK	Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COSCO	China Ocean Shipping Company
CTT	Container Terminal Tollerort
DW	Deutsche Welle [radio station]
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
G7	Group of Seven (the seven leading Western industrialised countries)
G20	Group of the 20 most important industrialised and emerging countries
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GfDS	Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache e. V.
GIGA	German Institute of Global and Area Studies (Hamburg)
GSI	Global Security Initiative
HHLA	Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG
HR/VP	High Representative/Vice President
ifw	Kiel Institute for the World Economy
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau [German national development bank]
KIP	Kommission Internationale Politik
MERICIS	Mercator Institute for China Studies (Berlin)
NPC	National People’s Congress
SGCC	State Grid Corporation of China
TTC	EU-US Trade and Technology Council

¹¹⁹ See the conference report on the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, “Xi Calls for Carrying Forward Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”, *Xinhua*, 9 June 2024, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202406/29/content_WS667f5847c6d0868f4e8e8adf.html (accessed 7 August 2024).

