EUROPE 05.12.2019 | Jiang Feng Jiang Feng

A Chinese perspective on German foreign policy

Germany needs to find its way at a time when the multilateral world order is faltering and foreign policy egomania is rampant

Read this article in German.

For German government representatives and top politicians visiting China, a quick trip to Shanghai has almost become obligatory. The city's rapid development provides a wealth of reasons for admiration and astonishment. Germans are often surprised that it's much more modern than people generally assume and that it offers a very different picture from the one conveyed in the German press.

But their surprise in turn surprises me. China is one of Germany's main trading partners and thus crucially important for its citizens' prosperity. Surely, people should be well informed about such a partner, not least the elite. Are the media responsible for the lack of information and education? After all, they portray a different China, causing it to be perceived as an authoritarian system. But if that is the case, how has it generated so much dynamism? How come lifestyles there are so diverse?

A leading German politician, who had been active in the *German Democratic Republic (GDR)*, once delivered a speech at Shanghai University. He mentioned the People's Republic of China and the GDR in the same breath and suggested how a country could be governed better. The insinuation was that the two countries were comparable.

The host audience did not bat an eyelid. They felt that the distinguished guest from Germany had meant well, he had just been poorly briefed. Because a comparison with East Germany missed the point about China completely. What about the free travel abroad, free enterprise and free individual development? And that's without even mentioning the richness of life that is so often admired about China. Setting a visitor straight, however, is considered discourteous and improper behaviour in China.

The US-Germany relationship

A country's foreign policy is based on realistic perceptions of the outside world and consideration of its own interests. In the examples here, however, Germany's perception of the outside world seems clouded – not only in relation to China.

There has been a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between Berlin and Washington in recent years. The idea was to convince the US government that Germany and the US shared the same values in the hope that the latter would continue to lead Germany and other allies, standing shoulder to shoulder against the enemies of the transatlantic community of values.

But times have changed. It's hard for the old continent to accept that US-German relations are now much more complicated and the US top priority under Trump is 'America first'. The current American colour range has only two colours, 'American' and 'non-American'. Germany belongs with every other country in the non-American section, which merely shows small nuances.

A whole host of decisions taken by the Trump administration have forced Europeans, and Germans, to change their perceptions. Calls for Europeans to take their fate in their own hands are getting louder. But Europe is strongly dependent on the US, militarily, geopolitically and economically. That's why it's not easy for it to stand on its own feet. That was made painfully clear by the collapse of the Iran Nuclear Deal and, in many respects, by the refugee crisis. The US is the limit of Europe's freedom. Does the European goddess of fate, Fortuna, still feel at home in the US? Becoming master of one's own fate is easy to talk about, but not so easy to achieve.

Germany's European inertia

In Germany's stance towards Russia, on the other hand, currently a single word dominates: 'sanctions'. Russia is of fundamental geopolitical and strategic importance for Germany. Obviously, Germany heavily depends on Russian energy, a security policy without stable relations between the two countries is therefore inconceivable. After the Cold War, Helmut Kohl's government was determined to integrate a still fragile Russia in the European and Transatlantic community.

As export nations, China and Germany are bound

In the early 2000s, Gerhard Schröder and Vladimir Putin cultivated a 'bromance' and German–Russian relations were characterised

in a comprehensive strategic partnership, characterised by mutual political trust.

by close cooperation at many levels, including civil society. Subsequently, however, relations cooled, especially after the Crimea crisis. Since then, the German debate on Russia has focused on 'sanctions' or 'no sanctions'. Alternative ideas would be urgently necessary, given Russia's importance, but there is no sign that is going to happen any time soon.

Germany and France are the engine of the European Union. But to the disappointment of many, this engine is faltering. A German science manager expressed her dismay as follows: 'Emmanuel Macron has ten new ideas every day, but Germany doesn't react.' People expect Germany to take the lead in European integration. Such leadership must look to the future, not dwell on the status quo or even the past. Thinking about the future requires new ideas, but insisting on the status quo just keeps Europe running on the spot.

Sinophobia in Europe?

It remains to be seen whether European integration should aim at a German Europe or a European Germany. In his book, Professor Ludger Kühnhardt of the University of Bonn remarks: 'Recently, a central European ambassador complained that he could no longer stand all the talk of Europe among the German *classe politique*. He was starting to find it threatening when his German neighbours in Berlin continued to insist that they were in favour of Europe and wanted more Europe – without any interest in hearing what others in Europe thought about it, or how they hoped to construct this shared Europe.' Germany should supply Brussels with European ideas and initiatives, not approaches based solely on its own interests. It's a big challenge, but Berlin has to pick up the gauntlet!

A European perspective necessarily includes the global dimension, which is characterised by diversity. That also applies to Sino-German relations. There have been successes and achievements, made possible by close exchange in politics, the economy, culture, education and civil society. But the richer and more multidimensional relations are, the more complex and diverse they become.

Mutual relations, which have stumbled now and again of late, must be established on a firmer footing. The Chinese public has the feeling that the German media provide a distorted view of their country. Their reports on China are predictably negative or out of touch. Some even talk of a 'demonisation' of China. Why does the German media portray

China in such a bad light, when China presents only a positive view of Germany? There is thus an enormous discrepancy between public perceptions in the two countries.

I have often been told that there is Sinophobia in Europe. China supposedly strives for hegemony using economic development. Allegedly, China is Europe's systemic adversary. In her opening statement, new Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared that 'some [countries] are turning towards authoritarian regimes, some are buying their global influence and creating dependencies by investing in ports and roads. And others are turning towards protectionism. … [Europe] want[s] multilateralism … [and we] have to do it the European way.'

Her words imply a politicisation of normal economic activities and attribute perfectly normal economic relations to rather sinister motives. Of course, Europe has to do things its way. But that does not mean that it is the only possible way. Otherwise, how credible could its professed multilateralism be? Europeans' classical wisdom has it that 'all roads lead to Rome'. There is more than one way, in other words. From a Chinese standpoint it goes without saying that China goes its own way. The population's rising prosperity shows that its way has worked.

China and Germany: a mutually beneficial relationship

As export nations, China and Germany are bound in a comprehensive strategic partnership, characterised by mutual political trust. The many visits by the two countries' heads of state and government tell their own story. Chinese president Xi Jinping has visited Europe a number of times, meeting Chancellor Merkel at many international conferences. The chancellor has been in China a dozen times and the Chinese prime minister is a regular visitor in Germany. Government consultations have been taking place since 2011. These have led to numerous cooperation agreements and are clearly driving bilateral relations. Sino-German relations have taken root, bloomed and born fruit within the framework of over 70 dialogue mechanisms, at all levels. There is a well-established community of interest between China and Germany with global responsibility. This contributes to both the well-being of their populations and the stability of world peace and growth.

The US-instigated trade war has harmed not only the Chinese and American economies, but the global economy too. The system of free trade has been turned upside down. China's response has been to open up its market even more. Many German firms that I have visited in

China confirm that the Chinese market is still more profitable than others, even though it has become more complex. In 2018, the volume of trade between China and Germany reached €199.3bn. That made China Germany's main trading partner for the third year in a row. And Germany is China's most important trading partner in Europe by far.

Foreign policy's ongoing task is to help Germany find its bearings in the new world order, transatlantically, in Europe and globally.

Civil society exchanges, unburdened by political conflict, are flourishing, based on mutual admiration and attraction. At present, there are 37,000 Chinese students and over 1,000 Chinese researchers in Germany. More than 1,300 higher education agreements have been concluded. For German students China is the most popular destination for study abroad, apart from Europe and the US. Young students base their choice on expectations for the future, which makes it a barometer of bilateral relations. A student from Bavaria told me that 'the way people live here in China and what they study at university is different than in Germany. But although it's different I don't find it strange. I'm not worried about it; in fact, it makes it more attractive. I find it all so fascinating.'

The world is undergoing profound change. Unilateralism and protectionism are putting the existing world order at risk. China and Germany need to champion multilateralism together. This requires mutual trust and strong cooperation at all levels and in all areas. China's economic and technological progress is challenging Germany and competition is increasing. But such competition is no reason to fear. Rather it's an encouragement to raise one's own game. Every entrepreneur knows that competition is good for business.

A foreign policy for the 21st century

With the Trump administration fanning the flames, foreign policy has been engulfed by a nationalist revival and egoism. The global order established so painstakingly after the World War II is being disrupted, along with the very idea of multilateralism. Our world has clearly become more turbulent and insecure. Since 2015, Europe has come under particular pressure from the refugee crisis. Diplomats have been putting out fires all over the place. Foreign policy cannot go on like this. It needs to move away from day-to-day thinking and rather deliberate fundamental ideas with an eye towards the future. Germany is known

throughout the world for its thinkers and its foreign policy needs a philosophy. Without one, it's hard to imagine it playing a leading role in the EU and assuming its global responsibility.

The notion of civil power was once a European achievement. In the meantime, it has almost been forgotten. In the European and German debate, a trend towards the militarisation of foreign and security policy has pushed it aside. But it's a civil, cultural and social Europe that commands the world's respect and admiration. That is what people look up to, not a military Europe. The philosophy underlying German foreign policy, based on Kant's perpetual peace, needs to guarantee a space adapted to our times – whether it sounds realistic or not. Even looking for a utopia can help in reaching this goal. History has shown this time and time again. Trying to ensure peace and security with more weapons and ever more imposing military exercises is a fool's game.

Human rights have come to be a universally accepted good in international politics. Providing assistance to defend human rights deserves merit. Alleviating the suffering of refugees or helping underdeveloped countries to stand on their own feet deserves the utmost respect.

But championing human rights abroad can easily slip into power political interference and ideological paternalism. In formerly colonised countries in particular this invokes mistrust and resentment. Probity and credibility in foreign policy become less certain when self-interest has to assert itself. It is becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile protecting human rights with the rights of one's own citizens, and with security and stability. The refugee crisis is one example.

Foreign policy's ongoing task is to help Germany find its bearings in the new world order, transatlantically, in Europe and globally. In the West, the tried and trusted friend America is not what it was. In the East, the Soviet Union – Europe's traditional foe – has morphed into Russia. China has changed from trading partner to economic partner and rival. On its own doorstep, Germany needs to come to terms with France on a whole series of European issues. In central and eastern Europe, the shadow of history must finally be lifted. This will not be easy. Germany needs to find its way at a time when the multilateral world order is faltering and foreign policy egomania is rampant. But the post-war order continues to develop. This time Germany must help to shape it, self-confidently open to the world and eyes fixed firmly on the future.



Jiang Feng Jiang Feng

Shanghai

Prof Dr Jiang Feng chairs the University Council of Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) in China.

-