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How the world looks at the German elections

China looks to Germany for its influence in Europe, South Africa hopes for continuity, and Russia doesn't think bilateral relations will improve now

China

China followed the elections in Germany very closely. This has to do with the special bilateral relationship, which has long been dominated by economic relations: China's trade with Germany alone comprises almost 40 per cent of the volume with the entire EU, German industry has established large subsidiaries in China, and sales in China are indispensable for the automotive sector.

However, Chinese think tanks are also keeping a close eye on how attitudes towards China are developing worldwide. They observe a steady deterioration in the image of China over the last few years – and with astonishing speed. This is especially true for the US: while there used to be reflections on the emergence of a G-2, open antagonism now dominates relations in many policy areas. From the Chinese point of view, this makes it seem logical on the one hand to stabilise relations with Asian neighbours, for example through China's RCEP membership. On the other hand, it directs attention to the relationship with Europe, and institutionally that means the EU. The most unfavourable development from the Chinese perspective would be if the EU were to largely follow the lines of the US leadership; and so preventing this is an important goal.

Now, a lot of damage been done recently: The EU's sanctions against China have caused deep disappointment, China's strong counter-sanctions have in turn dismayed the EU because they were perceived as disproportionate, skipping several possible levels of escalation. While both sides are still trying to understand each other's strategy, there is a consensus that relations have cooled down considerably and that a thaw

is currently not in sight. This makes relations with Germany important in two ways: on the one hand, as a bilateral partner country, and on the other hand, because Germany is seen as a leader in the EU – this is probably perceived more strongly in Beijing than in Berlin.

The bilateral dimension ranges from economic relations to cooperation on environmental and climate issues. Germany has a good image, partly because it is not burdened with the colonial past of other European nations. The Wilhelmine adventure in Qingdao was short-lived, yet it left lasting impulses for development, such as the Tsingtao Brewery, which is still considered a symbol of German virtues today. At the same time, the classification of international relations with China – as a triad of partner, competitor, and systemic rival – was first formulated in a strategy paper by the Federation of German Industries (BDI), months before it described almost word for word the position of the European Commission. The fact that German industry in particular, with its close involvement in the Chinese market, took this turn shows the change in bilateral relations.

Germany's influence on the EU is highly valued. The conclusion of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) is a case in point. It was negotiated tenaciously over seven years; towards the end of 2020, entrenched resistance was suddenly overcome quickly and the agreement was signed. It seems that China's lead negotiators were motivated to reach a conclusion while the existing German government was still able to promote the deal within the EU.

Much more important from Beijing's point of view seems to be how the EU will position itself in the area of foreign and security policy. Will its Indo-Pacific strategy have a measurable impact – or become a paper tiger? China knows that EU strategy papers are carefully formulated and agreed upon before they are published but has also experienced that implementation does not always follow the precise wording. This makes it difficult to assess what the EU is actually doing, especially in foreign and security policy.

Beijing therefore suspects that decisions on central foreign and security policy issues are reached through direct coordination among the larger nations of the EU. However, the UK has left the EU, France, the main remaining military actor, is tied up in Africa and has recently been severely alienated by the cancellation of its submarine deal with Australia. China sees Germany as a fundamentally moderating factor; it is also aware of its historical reluctance to engage in military operations. The perception is also that after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the European allies first need a longer period of reflection to clarify among

themselves under what conditions and with what means they are prepared to undertake future operations far outside the European territory.

This is the telescope through which China is looking at the German elections. The result will be assessed according to whether the future German government, bilaterally and through the EU track, is likely to increase or reduce existing tensions.

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South Africa

The South African media is full of election coverage – just not of the German one. Rather, campaigns are starting for the landmark local elections on 1 November. The results from Berlin are, at best, a marginal note in the papers.

Before the election, the approaching departure of Angela Merkel generated some interest. She is held in high esteem in South Africa, especially by the government. No other country in sub-Saharan Africa has she visited more often during her tenure. In August, South Africa's President Cyril Ramphosa paid a short visit to Berlin – officially for the meeting of the jointly sponsored G20 initiative 'Compact with Africa'. Above all, however, he wanted to say goodbye to Merkel in person. But there is also excellent cooperation with the social democrat Olaf Scholz. Scholz and his South African counterpart at the time, Tito Mboweni, together with three other finance ministers, wrote a joint open letter to the G20 countries calling for the introduction of a global minimum coroporate tax for companies – with success.

The mutual visits and joint initiatives are an expression of solid bilateral relations, based above all on economic interests. Both countries are each other's most important trading partners on the other continent. Moreover, there is deeper bilateral cooperation, most recently also to develop vaccine production capacities in South Africa. Berlin holds South Africa in high regard as a political stabiliser in the region and one of the eight so-called global partners of the Federal Republic of Germany. One reason why people here are probably looking calmly at the German elections is that hardly anyone expects anything fundamental to change under a new government.

In some progressive circles, at least, there are tender hopes that these two influential democracies will work more closely together on global issues in the future. Scholz and Mboweni achieved this with the

aforementioned initiative – a decision on a global minimum coroporate tax has been reached. South Africa, on the other hand, did not find support in Germany with its initiative to temporarily suspend patent protection for technologies to combat Covid-19.

Nevertheless, more than two thirds of South Africans believe that the pandemic has brought the world closer together – in Germany that's only slightly more than half. The figures of the latest Global Census of the FES New York also show that support for multilateralism and the United Nations is much higher in South Africa than in Germany, for example. This is a good basis for even more strategic dialogue to democratise and strengthen global governance and the UN, to reduce global inequality, and to tackle the climate crisis. An exchange that should also take place more below the government level between progressives in the party, parliament, and trade unions.

But just as international issues hardly featured in the German election campaign, navel-gazing unfortunately also prevails in South Africa at the moment. The tough process, which was driven forward politically by President Ramaphosa, of dealing with the escalation of corruption and state capture during President Jacob Zuma's term in office (2009 to 2018) is linked to a bitter power struggle within the African National Congress (ANC).

The ANC is also in financial difficulties and in conflict with its full-time staff because of the non-payment of salaries. While the ANC is preoccupied with itself, the social crisis in the country is deepening, unemployment has risen to 35 per cent, and in poorer neighbourhoods in particular there are repeated bottlenecks in the supply of water and electricity, for example. With these difficulties, the ANC is now entering the local election campaign. A result of less than 50 per cent seems possible nationwide. In even more municipalities and provinces, there will probably have to be coalition governments. This may also be necessary at the national level for the first time at some point in the future.

This development makes the current German government formation relevant for South Africa again. For it is certainly of interest how majorities in Berlin now emerge from the election results and how coalition negotiations and agreements succeed. And so the attention here will presumably be greater when a new government is actually formed in Berlin. On 27 September, the slightly disappointed conclusion on the morning news of radio station 702 was that is it was still 'rather unclear' how this government would look like.

Russia

Usually, elections in Europe don't really receive much attention in the Russian media. The fact that Angela Merkel and her 16-year tenure have been talked about quite a lot in recent weeks therefore shows the special importance of Germany for Russian politics.

The German chancellor enjoys a certain respect in Russia because of her long reign and straightforward manner. So there was concern some analyses about how Germany will relate to Russia in the future, what role it can still play in international relations. However, the elections also come at a time when there is already clear disillusionment with German-Russian relations at governmental level.

The turning point here was Angela Merkel's clear position in the Navalny case. From the Russian point of view, this interference in Russia's internal disputes was seen as a breach of taboo. Since then, German-Russian relations have visibly cooled down, evident in such symbolic acts as the extensive meeting of the Russian foreign minister with representatives of the far right AfD parliamentary group. From the Kremlin's point of view, this was a welcome opportunity for payback, despite no real interest in the German far-right. Even during the Chancellor's last visit, though she was paid respect with much pomp and circumstance, it became clear at a press conference that the Chancellor's criticism of the human rights situation in the country was no longer taken seriously.

On the basis of this very sobering assessment of German politics, expectations of the new government are therefore not particularly high. No matter which coalition will rule in the end, Russia does not expect a significant improvement in relations. There is a conviction that an anti-Russian sentiment dominates in Europe, which will continue to try to contain Russia, and that Germany cannot or will not buck this trend.

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