

Three Explanations for the Unfavorable Views of China in Germany

Christoph Lhotka

Christoph Lhotka is a published author on the Indo-Pacific and has a Bachelors of Arts in International Affairs.

Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region is arguably the new center of geopolitical and economic power. For this reason, established countries such as Germany are adapting their stances to regional realities. Stances towards China have been particularly fragile, which is why this inquiry aims to explain the negative public sentiment towards China in Germany while building upon public opinion trends and current international affairs literature. Based on a multilingual analysis, three key hypotheses for the negative views of Beijing in German politics and society are suggested. Despite their strong economic relationship, Sino-German relations have an ambivalent potential, mirroring a pan-European trend towards China. This approach constitutes a unique and factual insight as a multilingual and public analysis allows for new explanations for the geostrategic involvement of the second and fourth-largest economies in the world.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific region, China–Germany relations, Foreign Affairs, International Relations

Paper published by EUTOPIA Student Think Tank (eustt.org) in it's aim of giving voice to european students' shared knowledge.



Introduction

China is facing a growing international resentment towards its policies. It is now actively changing its approach to international relations on a broad spectrum. Symbolic for this is the use of its veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), resulting in the rejection of five out of six resolutions from 2019 until now (Wu, 2020). Having the full right to do so as a permanent member of the UNSC, such assertiveness raises questions about China's global intentions. A recent survey by the PEW Research Center provides insightful data about the unfavorable views of China reaching historic highs in many countries (Silver et al., 2020).

This empirical data links well with the existent narratives in academia. Increasing Chinese international involvement is accompanied by public scrutiny regarding various infringements of international law, leading to a surge of unfavorable views towards China. Germany's prominent role in European politics, in addition to being one of the most active trading partners of China, allows for the demonstration of three propositions based on the data from the PEW Research Center.

The three main reasons for the unfavorable views of China in Germany can be approached using public opinion analysis, which is a crucial indicator of societal trends and public interest in international affairs. This methodological approach interlinks with ongoing socio-political changes, reflecting normative scrutiny. One reason, as suggested by the literature, is that Germany's interaction with China is mostly based on economic coexistence and the emergence of new markets for German high technology (Li, 2018). The aim will be to show how this is bound to change. The second dimension considers the new global attentiveness to Chinese domestic issues, that are related to human rights and freedom of speech. Finally, one can evaluate the increasing polarization and 'rise of the right' in Germany as an additional factor affecting the perception of China.



Source Analysis

The PEW Research Center is a think tank in the United States (U.S.) that provides statistical analyses and data for a variety of political topics concerning international and domestic affairs. This think tank was founded in 1990 in the context of a research project, and it aims for political knowledge enhancement for all, with over 160 employees (Pew Research Center, 2021). It acts as one of the most renowned think tanks in the world and operates in several countries. This is of significance as it underlines the relevance of the findings.



Technological Competitor

The change in German awareness of high-tech exports to China has its base on two key areas. As noticed in Chowdhry & Felbermayr (2020), Germany is focusing on trade diversion with China, indicating exporting from an efficient country towards a less efficient one. In this scenario, Germany saw China as a partner rather than a competitor. Chinese investments in Germany were supported by national policy, resulting in a steady increase in the funds (Bian & Emons, 2017). With the upsurge of Chinese know-how in the high-tech sector, notably 5G, Germany observes how China's technology consistently advances. The 5G cellular networks act as a continuation of the 4G technology, currently used for data exchange between mobile devices. The impact of 5G is revolutionizing data communication, with China leading the way (Rao & Prasad, 2018).

Similar trends can be observed in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming at heavily connecting China and Europe through the sea as well as land routes. Against this background, investments are being used as strategic bargaining chips to advance technological narratives by Beijing (Wang, 2016). This trend has led European actors to undermine German decision-making power in the European Union, a trend echoed by negative German public perception (see: Dempsey, 2020). Finally, the poll touches upon German awareness of China using its European partners to undermine Germany's proposed policies.

Connecting these elements with the PEW Research Center findings, a positive correlation can be observed between the start of the BRI in 2013 and the negative appraisal of China in Germany. Yet, it would be too easy to base the BRI and the negative trend on a cause-and-effect relationship, as the magnitude of Chinese investment only gradually increases over the years. In 2015, a drastic dip in the Chinese image in Germany can be noticed . This dip marks the launch of the ‘Made in China 2025’ initiative. The initiative draws clear parallels to the digital industry of Germany, striving to establish China as a high-tech creator rather than a manufacturer. Kennedy (2015) sees the Chinese initiative as wanting to progress along the lines of the success story of the ‘Made in Germany’ label (see: Ewing, 2014).



Global Attention

The second element leading to the unfavorable view of China in Germany is the awareness of Chinese behavior in the international arena. Notable examples are the increase of Chinese maritime involvement in the South China Sea, portraying the ongoing disputes with regional allies of Germany such as Japan and Australia. In addition, China is gaining the reputation of a ‘police state’ through the creation of the social credit system and the fierce suppression of democratic movements in Hongkong.

The large-scale ethnic cleansing of Uyghurs in Xinjiang triggers a massive resentment by the German public, correlating with the PEW Research Center findings. One can attribute such perception to historic German narratives instilling remembrance of ethnic discrimination and gross violations of Human Rights. Failing to contain such developments on a domestic scale, the world now focuses on Chinese Human Rights violations on an almost daily basis, unquestionably worsening its global perception (Kent, 2019).



Polarization

Additionally, a renewal of already existent racist and anti-Asian sentiments could explain the unfavorable views of China in Germany. Overall, the ‘rise of the right’ relished the refugee crises of 2015, which started a trend of political division and xenophobia. The questionable European response of closing borders and several member states, including Germany, violating the Schengen agreement has stimulated new chauvinistic actors (Durand et al., 2017). Right-wing parties polarize by communicating the protection of German jobs from foreign workers, in particular workers from China (Havertz, 2018). These trends intensified throughout the Covid-19 pandemic as the impacts on the German economy and the related labor market were particularly drastic. The impact and negative views of China connect with the societal increase of nationalistic sentiments, providing an alternative explanation for the PEW Research Center.



Conclusions

These three elements touch upon the survey’s findings and allow for a multidimensional approach to the unfavorable views of China in Germany. The disapproval of Chinese policy is rooted in the increasing public awareness of China as a technological competitor, its negative Human Rights record, and finally, an internal political polarization in Germany.

September 2020 marked the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, aiming to reduce some of the tensions in the Germany-China relations, as well as in other European countries. Yet, September 2020 also marked the launch of the German Indo-Pacific strategy that includes vital elements of diversifying trading partners in Asia, as well as zero-tolerance for Human Rights violations. Public perception has resulted in policymakers reconsidering their stance on China. The German Indo-Pacific strategy is a prominent example that shows the initiation of a new attitude towards Beijing. The PEW Research Center data suggests that parts of German motivation for an Asian political strategy root in the unfavorable views of China.



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