

Germany turns to Asia

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel bluntly addressed the historic crisis in transatlantic relations exposed by last week's NATO and G7 summits, declaring Sunday in a speech delivered in a Bavarian beer tent that the US was no longer a reliable ally and Europe had to take matters into its own hands. One aspect of that orientation is seen in Berlin's systematic expansion of political and economic ties with Asia.

Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang arrived in Berlin Wednesday evening and was welcomed outside the chancellor's office with military honors. The ceremony was followed by initial discussions with Merkel and several ministers "about issues of foreign and economic policy." Those in attendance included Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and Economy Minister Brigitte Zypries.

Merkel will meet with Li again today for "private discussions," according to the German government's website. Several bilateral agreements will be signed and a joint press conference has been scheduled. Among the issues to be discussed is a common position in advance of the G20 summit in Hamburg in early June, which Chinese President Xi Jinping is expected to attend.

Germany's economic relations with China are more extensive than with any other country outside the European Union. Regular government consultations have taken place between both countries since 2011. China was Germany's most important trading partner last year, ahead of both France and the United States, with total trade approaching €170 billion.

Cooperation is now to be deepened. Deutsche Bank announced prior to Li Keqiang's arrival in Berlin that it intends to finance infrastructure projects as part of the "new silk road" initiative in the coming five years with a €3 billion loan agreed jointly with the China Development Bank. The Chinese government's "One Belt, One Road" strategy is based on the historical Silk Road of the Middle Ages. It includes plans for the construction of a series of ports, railways and roads to connect the major economic centers of China with Europe.

At the beginning of the week, the German government agreed multibillion-euro development projects with Asia's second giant, India. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Merkel agreed a development budget within the framework of the fourth German-Indian government consultation worth "a billion euros each year" to India.

Modi spoke of India's major demand for the modernization of its infrastructure. Among other things "roads, railways, civilian air traffic and modern communications technology" were required. India wanted to profit from the expertise of the German economy in all of these areas, he added. "It is as if we were made for each other," stated the Indian prime minister.

Germany is already India's most important trading partner within the EU, with total trade of around €17 billion. But the export-dependent German economy is hoping for much more in the years to come. "The 'Make in India' campaign and the Indian government's numerous economic reforms have created new impulses for investment," enthused the president of the Federal Association of Mid-Sized Businesses, Mario Ohoven.

Along with Modi and Merkel, ministers in relevant areas also participated in the discussions. On the German side, the foreign, economy, education, environment and development ministries were represented. Along with bilateral issues, a central focus was the "framing of the global order," according to the German government.

The meetings with Modi and Li had been planned for some time. They are part of a comprehensive reorientation by German imperialism that is bound up with the growing rift in transatlantic relations. Shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump, Gabriel announced the development of a German and European strategy for Asia in order "to exploit the spaces vacated by America."

Gabriel then officially announced on March 24 "a new orientation" for Germany's "Asia policy," and "the establishment of a new Asia and Pacific department" at the Foreign Ministry. He stated in a Foreign Ministry press release: "In many areas of international politics, we

are currently experiencing crises, turmoil and new dynamics. One gets the impression that the world is being measured anew—and everyone is using his own tape measure. One thing is clear: the rising states of Asia will assume a key position in this new measuring of the world.”

It was necessary for Germany “to intensify relations with Asia and organize them more strategically so as to do justice to this region of 4 billion people and rapidly growing markets,” according to Gabriel. He had “therefore decided to build an Asian department in the Foreign Ministry for the first time in order to better pool and further develop our regional competencies.” It was “high time for us to do justice to Asia’s growing weight by changing the composition of our team in the Foreign Ministry.”

Later that day, Gabriel declared in a programmatic speech delivered to the 97th annual meeting of the German Asia-Pacific Business Association in Hamburg: “Asia is a key region for our future here at home, because the routes to resolve our global challenges can no longer be developed only by the old structures from the post-World War II period. Rather, the routes to resolve our global challenges run through Asia.”

It is not only Gabriel’s choice of words that recalls German imperialism’s old mantra of “a place in the sun.” The German Asia-Pacific Business Association’s first annual dinner began in 1901 with the declared goal of “the discussion of German interests at the most regular meetings possible.” The guest at the first event was Prince Heinrich of Prussia, the brother of Germany’s last Kaiser, Wilhelm II.

Today, German imperialism is pursuing its geopolitical ambitions in Asia even more systematically and aggressively than at the beginning of the 20th century. On April 5 and 6, the Foreign Ministry brought together Germany’s 40 ambassadors in the Indian Ocean region for an extraordinary regional conference in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, to inform them about the new global orientation of German policy.

State Secretary Markus Ederer declared in his opening speech, in the typical style of German great-power politics, “What a wonderful setting right at the shores of the Indian Ocean! I could not think of a more appropriate background for today’s premiere... For the first time, German ambassadors from five continents meet to discuss a region that has not traditionally been on the radar screen of German foreign policy: the Indian Ocean.”

Along with economic and trade interests, Germany and

the EU are also openly pursuing security policy and military interests in a region that is already one of the most hotly contested in the world. Under Trump’s predecessor Barack Obama, the US announced its “pivot to Asia,” aimed at economically isolating and militarily encircling China. The US government is ever more openly preparing for direct military conflict with Iran, North Korea, and China.

Germany’s goal is to intervene in this explosive region and pursue its geostrategic and economic interests, including by military means.

Ederer stated in Colombo, “Europe is no longer a security ‘dwarf.’ We have been critical in achieving the nuclear deal with Iran; we help stabilize Somalia (the EU is the main contributor to AMISOM); we offer substantive humanitarian and development assistance in Yemen.” He continued, “On maritime security, the EU is successfully deterring piracy off the coast of Somalia within operation ‘Atlanta’... Yet, I believe there is room for more. We should further enhance our security cooperation with partners in the region. Can we, for instance, invest more in joint exercises?”

Despite the absurdity of such statements—the German Navy is not even close to being in a position to control the Indian Ocean or take on the heavily armed United States—these are not merely empty words. Foreign Minister Gabriel also met yesterday with the Indonesian minister for the coordination of maritime affairs, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, for discussions in the Foreign Ministry to prepare the signing of a declaration of intent on a maritime agenda.

Germany’s pivot to Asia is not being welcomed among all sections of the ruling elite. A comment in the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* described the belief “that Europe can, confronted with the rejection of its love by Washington, now embrace Asia” as “self-aggrandisement.” Europe is viewed “from an Asian perspective currently at best as a picture of crisis.” In addition, “from New Delhi to Beijing and Jakarta, the potential partners in Asia are not easy to deal with.” China thinks, for example, it can “thanks to its economic power... punish anybody who resists its ideas.”



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