

German Chancellor Merz tours East Asia in search of war partners

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Chancellor Friedrich Merz's latest tour of East Asia clearly illustrates the aggressive vigour with which Germany is pursuing its economic and geostrategic interests, while increasingly relying on military means.

Merz, leading a high-level 30-strong business delegation, visited Singapore, South Korea and Japan. The focus was on so-called "de-risking"—opening up new markets and investment opportunities to replace the deteriorating economic relations with China and, though this is less openly discussed, to curb US influence.

China remains by far Germany's largest economic partner in the region. German investment in China totals €110 billion and increased by €5.6 billion in the first half of the year alone, significantly more than in the US. German companies are now relocating research and development to China so as not to fall behind technologically.

Yet China is increasingly shifting from being a partner to a rival. Brussels and Beijing are slapping tariffs and trade restrictions on one another. German exports to China have plummeted from €107 billion to €81 billion since 2022.

However, Merz's trip was not merely concerned with finding new markets to replace China, but about more far-reaching geopolitical objectives. What drives him and other leading heads of state are the international contradictions of imperialism and the associated struggle for a violent redivision of the world.

The chancellor repeatedly stressed the link between military strength and economic power. In a speech he delivered on Wednesday at the German-Japanese Business Summit in Tokyo, Merz emphasised "that freedom and peace can only exist if we protect them with power and also with strength."

"We are witnessing wars in Europe and in the Near

and Middle East. We are witnessing increasing protectionism and intense competition for technologies, raw materials and industrial value creation," said the chancellor. "But when global supply chains are exploited for political ends, when free access to key technologies is hindered, when securing raw materials is used as a tool of power politics, ... then this jeopardises growth, prosperity and, ultimately, the security of entire regions."

Merz did not stop at mere words. His delegation included representatives from two major German defence contractors, Quantum Systems and Airbus Defence & Space. Quantum Systems supplies the Ukrainian and German armed forces with drones and is seeking global expansion. Following the collapse of the Franco-German FCAS fighter jet project, Airbus's defence division intends to join the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), which is being developed jointly by the UK, Italy and Japan.

When Merz arrived in Tokyo, the US-Japanese military exercise "Keen Sword"—which simulates a war against China over Taiwan—was just drawing to a close. For the first time, a 100-strong medical unit from the Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces) also took part, practising the joint treatment of wounded soldiers.

"The feeling among the Japanese that they are, to some extent, on their own in this region makes it particularly important that we show our support here and emphasise that we stand by our Japanese comrades when it matters," Ralf Hoffmann, chief medical officer of the Bundeswehr, enthused afterwards.

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius previously visited Tokyo in March and stated that, "while focusing" on NATO's eastern flank and other "conflicts such as those in the Middle East," we must not "lose sight of other regions and the challenges they

face.” He agreed to “significantly more intensive” military cooperation with Japan and several joint defence projects.

The far-right Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, who received Merz with military honours, is in the process of abolishing the pacifist clause in the Japanese constitution and massively increasing military spending. Merz promised to cooperate closely with Japan on the development and production of new technologies and weapons. The business leaders present were delighted.

As in Ukraine, where Germany is working with supporters of former Nazi collaborators, German imperialism is also drawing on reactionary historical traditions in Japan. The Japanese Empire was allied with Nazi Germany during the Second World War and committed appalling war crimes in China and other countries. November 25 will mark the 90th anniversary of the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Berlin and Tokyo, which was directed against the Soviet Union and “communism” and from which, four years later, the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan emerged.

In Singapore and Seoul, too, Merz was keen to stake out new spheres of influence. In Singapore on Tuesday, in a “keynote speech,” he called for a “major interregional agreement with the members of the Trans-Pacific Partnership” and, at the same time, urged further trade agreements with individual countries in the region. In the long term, he is aiming for a trade agreement between the EU and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), whose eleven members have a combined population of around 700 million.

Singapore is a key financial and economic hub in the region. Almost 2,400 German companies have their regional headquarters in the city-state.

In Tokyo, Merz proposed the establishment of a “global political alliance for rules-based trade” with the aim of defending, strengthening and further developing the WTO and “rules-based trade.” This is directed not only against China, but above all against Donald Trump’s US, which Merz did not, however, mention in his speeches.

While Merz was in Singapore, Seoul and Tokyo, strengthening existing strategic alliances and forging new ones, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier was visiting China, where he is due to meet President

Xi Jinping on Friday. The trip was coordinated with Merz. Steinmeier is expected to smooth things over with Beijing while Berlin recalibrates its policy towards China, and to avoid an overly abrupt break that would hit the German economy hard.

According to the Office of the Federal President, Steinmeier intends to discuss problematic economic relations during his visit, as well as fairness and how trade conflicts might be avoided. He also intends to urge China to use its influence over Russia to persuade it to end the war in Ukraine.



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