

POLICY BRIEF

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Why Germany matters for Japan

Hans Kundnani

Since the euro crisis began in 2010, there has been much debate about German power in Europe. Germany has been widely seen as a kind of European “hegemon.” But this both exaggerates the extent of German power in Europe and underplays how problematic it is. Rather, Germany has reverted to the position of “semi-hegemony” within Europe that it occupied between 1871 and 1945.¹ However, whereas the classical “German question” was geopolitical, the new version of the “German question” is geo-economic – that is, German power is now economic rather than military. These questions around German power are extremely important for the future of Europe. But why should anyone in Japan be interested in them?

In this policy brief, I argue that there are three reasons why Germany matters for Japan. First, Germany and Japan have followed parallel historical trajectories from the second half of the nineteenth century to the post-Cold War period. Second, China and Germany have developed an increasingly close relationship in the last decade that has implications for the ability of Germany and the European Union to take a stand against China’s aggressive actions in Asia. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there are also striking parallels between the rise of Germany at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century and the rise of China now.

Parallel historical trajectories

The first reason Germany should be of interest to Japan has to do with the parallel historical trajectories that the two countries have followed going back to their simultaneous rapid rise in the second half of the nineteenth century – the *Kaiserrreich* in Germany and the Meiji Restoration in Japan. In fact, Germany was in many ways the model for Japan’s modernization – in particular, Meiji Japan borrowed to a large extent from Wilhelmine Germany’s constitutional and legal system. Both countries had a strong militarist tradition that became

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¹ Hans Kundnani, *Doitsu Pawa no Gyakusetsu* (Tokyo: Ichigeisha, 2019). Originally published in English as *The Paradox of German Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

dominant in the 1930s, when they expanded in their respective regions and ultimately joined forces against the Allies in World War II.

If anything, the parallels between Germany and Japan became even more striking after the defeat of the two countries in World War II. Remade into democracies with their security guaranteed by the United States, Japan and West Germany renounced the use of military force and became “civilian powers” – that is, “a new type of international power” that used multilateral institutions and economic cooperation to “civilize” international relations.² In both countries, a strong pacifist tendency emerged in response to the earlier tradition of militarism.

After the end of the Cold War, however, Germany and Japan came under pressure to make a greater contribution to international security and in particular to increase defence spending. In parallel, they started to contribute to United Nations peacekeeping operations in the 1990s. In this context, the concept of “normality” became central to foreign policy debates in both countries. In Germany, there was much debate about whether Germany could and should become a “normal” country that used military force like France or the UK.³ Similarly, since the early 1990s, there has been a debate about whether Japan can, or should, become a “normal country.”⁴

Germany has gone slightly further than Japan in changing its approach to the use of military force. Constitutional constraints on the deployment of the Bundeswehr, the German

military, were effectively removed in 1994, when the Constitutional Court ruled that German troops could be deployed anywhere around the world and in any capacity as long as the deployment was approved by the Bundestag, the German parliament. In contrast, the use of Japan’s Self Defense Forces still remains tightly constrained and limited to peacekeeping operations. Germany also spends more on defence as a proportion of GDP than Japan, though Japanese defence spending is rising quickly.⁵ But during the last decade, opposition to the use of military force has once again hardened – particularly after Germany suffered casualties in Afghanistan.

More significant than these differences on the use of military force, however, are other ways in which Germany and Japan have diverged during the last decade. Though Germany remains committed to being a *Friedensmacht*, or “force for peace,” its “civilian power” identity has nevertheless weakened as it has pursued a more realist approach to foreign policy. In particular, it has become increasingly assertive in its use of economic power – above all within the eurozone. Since the euro crisis began, Germany has used tough conditionality to impose its preferences on other European countries and even to remake their economies in its own image. Thus whereas Japan has remained a “civilian power,” I have argued that Germany should now be thought of instead as a “geo-economic power.”⁶

One might also argue that Japan’s policy on arms exports strengthens its claim still to be a “civilian power” in contrast to Germany.

2 Hanns W. Maull, “Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers”, *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1990/91.

3 See Hans Kundnani, “The Concept of ‘Normality’ in German Foreign Policy since Unification,” *German Politics and Society*, Volume 30, Issue 2, Summer 2012, pp. 38–58.

4 See Yoshihide Soeya, Masayuki Tadokoro and David A. Welch (eds.), *Japan as a ‘Normal Country’? A Nation in Search of Its Place in the World* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011).

5 According to World Bank figures, Germany spent 1.2 percent of GDP on defence in 2018 while Japan spent 0.9 percent. See World Bank, Military expenditure (% of GDP), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>.

6 Hans Kundnani, “Germany as a geo-economic power,” *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2011, pp. 31-45.

Throughout the post-war period, the Federal Republic exported weapons – a kind of blind spot in its “civilian power” identity. In the case of Japan, on the other hand, the renunciation of the use of military force also extended to arms sales: since 1967, the government has in effect banned itself from selling weapons. Admittedly, Japan is now changing this policy so it can take part in joint development military technology projects with its allies as part of its commitment to “collective self-defence.” But it is hard to imagine that Japan will ever export weapons on the scale of Germany, which is now one of the world’s largest exporters of weapons.

The relationship between China and Germany

During the last decade, Germany has also developed an increasingly close economic and political relationship with China – the second reason why Japan should be interested in Germany. The basis for this relationship was the exponential growth of German exports, in particular automobiles and machinery, to China. This economic symbiosis led to an increasingly close political relationship, which was institutionalized in 2011 in the form of bi-annual government-to-government consultations – in effect, joint cabinet meetings. In part because of its perception of German dominance within the EU, China increasingly saw Germany as its preferred interlocutor in Europe. “If you want something done in Brussels you go to Berlin,” a Chinese official told me in 2012.⁷

In the last few years, Germans have become

somewhat more sceptical about China – in particular as it began to acquire the *Mittelstand* companies that form the backbone of German manufacturing.⁸ Against this background, it seemed that Germany was becoming more willing to support a tougher European approach to China. In particular, Germany seemed to be embracing a more assertive approach to economic policy questions based on the principle of “reciprocity”. This led to a European Commission report published in March 2019 which said that “there is a growing appreciation in Europe that the balance of challenges and opportunities presented by China has shifted” and declared that China was a “systemic rival.”⁹

Nevertheless, Germany’s economy remains extremely dependent on China as a source of demand for its exports – especially as demand from within Europe remains low, itself a consequence of the austerity Germany has imposed, and as the United States threatens tariffs on German products. Big German companies like BASF, Siemens and Volkswagen, which exert a large influence on policy towards China, are particularly dependent on China. In recent months, as a recession looms in Germany and fears about the consequences of the trade war with the United States increase, those companies have exerted pressure on the chancellery and Germany has been perceived as reversing its shift towards a tougher approach and “going soft” on China.¹⁰

The close relationship between China and Germany should be of concern to Japan because of the way it may constrain Germany

⁷ Author interview, Beijing, 2012.

⁸ See Hans Kundnani, “Germany’s New Skepticism About China,” German Marshall Fund, 24 October 2016, <http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2016/10/24/germany-s-new-skepticism-about-china>.

⁹ European Commission, EU-China – A strategic outlook, 12 March 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

¹⁰ Noah Barkin, “Is Germany Going Soft on China?,” Atlantic Council, 31 August 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/is-germany-going-soft-on-china/>; Noah Barkin, “A Vulnerable Germany Finds it Hard to Say No to China,” Berlin Policy Journal, 9 September 2019, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/a-vulnerable-germany-finds-it-hard-to-say-no-to-china/>.

– and, by extension, the European Union – from taking a stand against China’s aggressive actions in Asia. In recent years, Japan has intensified security co-operation with France and the United Kingdom, including regular 2+2 meetings of foreign and defence ministers, acquisition and cross-servicing agreements, and joint defence technology projects. But Japan has not so far been able to develop similar links with Germany. Of course, Germany has fewer military capabilities to offer than France or the UK – particularly naval capabilities. But Germany’s inactivity also reflects its reluctance to antagonize China.

Moreover, while the EU as a whole may be shifting towards a tougher approach to protect its own companies, German reluctance also holds it back from playing a more active role in Asian security. In 2016, for example, French Defence Minister Yves Le Drian proposed that European navies coordinate a “regular and visible” presence in maritime areas of Asia in order to uphold the international rule of law.¹¹ But though Germany is rhetorically committed to the international rule of law, it is reluctant to take such steps to uphold it. As a result, the French proposal has gone nowhere. While France and the UK have since then carried out presence operations in the South China Sea on their own, this has not coalesced into a more coherent joint European approach.

Germany’s economic dependence could also make it reluctant to take other steps like economic sanctions in the event of a crisis provoked by aggressive Chinese actions in Asia. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Germany was initially hesitant to impose sanctions on Russia – in part because of opposition from German business. Shortly after the annexation,

Siemens chief executive Joe Kaeser met President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and said that his company had done business in Russia for 160 years and would not allow “short-term turbulence” to affect it. While German business eventually supported the imposition of sanctions on Russia, it is much harder to imagine that it would do so in response to a kind of “Asian Crimea” scenario.¹² Interestingly, Kaeser is now the chairman of the Asia-Pacific Committee for German Business and plays an influential role in German China policy.

Germany’s past, China’s future?

Meanwhile, as China rises, parallels with Germany’s past have also become more striking – the third and perhaps ultimately most important reason why people in Japan should be interested in Germany. In 2000 Aaron Friedberg of Princeton University wrote an influential essay called “Will Europe’s Past Be Asia’s Future?” in which he argued that great-power rivalry in Asia in the twenty-first century could resemble that in Europe in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.¹³ Since then, there has been an ongoing debate among academics and analysts about the relevance to Asian security of the European history that culminated – catastrophically – in World War I.

Within this overall comparison between Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Asia now, some see particular similarities between the role played by Germany then and China now – what the American strategist Edward Luttwak (also a key figure in debates about “geo-economics”) called the “inevitable analogy.”¹⁴ As Charles Krauthammer put it: “Modern China is the Germany of a century ago – a rising, expanding, have-not

11 Yves Le Drian, speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 5 June 2016.

12 See Hans Kundnani, The nightmare for German business: an “Asian Crimea,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 2 June 2014, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_nightmare_for_german_business_an_asian_crimea267.

13 Aaron Friedberg, “Will Europe’s Past Be Asia’s Future?” *Survival*, vol. 42, no. 3, Autumn 2000, pp. 147–59.

14 Edward Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. The Logic of Strategy* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012), chapter 7.

power seeking its place in the sun.”¹⁵ This may be too blunt. But if in general Asia’s future resembles Europe’s past in some ways, China’s future may specifically resemble Germany’s past.

The basis of the “inevitable analogy” is geopolitics, which seem to have created a dynamic that is remarkably similar to the one in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Like Germany at the time of its rise, China “has the seas but not the ocean,” as Gong Li, formerly deputy director of the Institute of International Strategy at the Central Party School in Beijing, puts it. In order to access the ocean, which it needs to as a rising power with a growing demand for resources, it must face the pre-eminent naval power of the day – just as Germany did. China is developing its naval capabilities and challenging the United States much as Germany’s development of its navy under Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz challenged the United Kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century.

Against the background of these geopolitical similarities, foreign policy debates in China today echo those in Wilhelmine Germany. In particular, Chinese strategists today are divided about whether to focus on the projection of power by land or by sea much like German strategists at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century were.¹⁶ “Navalist” strategists such as Admiral Yang Yi argue that sea power is essential for China’s

rise. But others such as Wang Jisi have argued that China should “rebalance” its foreign policy by focusing on the area from Central Asia to the Middle East – in other words, land power. Precisely because the expansion of its naval capabilities is increasing tensions with the United States, China should “march west” – in other words, “pivot” to the area from which the United States is perceived to be “retreating” – and thus avoid the mistakes Germany made in its naval arms race with Britain.¹⁷

Thus China faces a similar dilemma as it rises as Germany did in the early twentieth century – albeit in a very different world. With this in mind, James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara of the United States Naval War College compared in detail the rise of Chinese sea power today to the rise of German sea power a century ago.¹⁸ They concluded that today’s China not only has important strategic advantages over Wilhelmine Germany, but, aware of Germany’s past, has also taken a smarter, more low-profile approach as it rises than Germany did: “studied understatement” instead of “reckless posturing.” Whereas Germany built massive ships to rival Britain’s dreadnoughts, China has focused instead on developing asymmetrical capabilities. In short, Beijing may be better placed to fulfil its naval aspirations than Berlin was a century ago.

Meanwhile, China’s attempts to project power by land also resemble those of Wilhelmine Germany. In particular, the Silk Road Economic Belt – the land-based element of China’s Belt

15 Charles Krauthammer, “Why President Obama is right about India,” *Washington Post*, 12 November 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/11/AR2010111106072.html>. The reference to a “place in the sun” is to a famous statement by the German chancellor Bernhard von Bülow in 1897: “We do not want to put anyone in our shadow, but we also demand our place in the sun.” See http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/607_Buelow_Place%20in%20the%20Sun_111.pdf.

16 See Geoff Eley, “Empire by Land or Sea? Germany’s Imperial Imaginary, 1840–1945,” in Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley (eds.), *German Colonialism in a Global Age* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

17 See Yun Sun, “March West: China’s Response to the U.S. Rebalancing,” *Brookings Institution*, 31 January 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/01/31/march-west-chinas-response-to-the-u-s-rebalancing/>.

18 James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “History Rhymes: The German Precedent for Chinese Seapower,” *Orbis*, Volume 54, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 14–34.

and Road Initiative, which will run from China through Central Asia to Europe – is reminiscent of Germany’s approach at the beginning of the twentieth century. As an element of its *Weltpolitik*, or “world policy”, Germany planned to build a railway linking Berlin with Constantinople and Mesopotamia, which would allow it to bypass British-controlled sea lanes and displace British influence in the Middle East. The Berlin-Baghdad railway, which was never completed, was even seen by some as a new “Silk Road” – itself a term that had been coined by a German, Ferdinand von Richthofen, just over a decade before.

Conclusion

Thus whereas the “German question” is now “geo-economic” rather than geopolitical, the “Chinese question” looks a lot like the classical – that is, the pre-1945 – version of the “German question.” Germany and Japan rose at around the same time and followed strikingly similar historical trajectories from the second half of the nineteenth century to the immediate post-Cold War period. But the parallels between a rising China and a rising Germany – though separated by over a century – now look even more compelling. As Japan struggles to deal with China’s rise and its implications for Asia, an understanding of Wilhelmine Germany may help. In other words, in the end, Germany’s past may be even more important for Japan than its present.