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### About the author, Pauline Geyer

**Pauline Geyer** is currently pursuing a dual master's degree in International Security at Sciences Po Paris and International Relations at Peking University China. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations and Social Sciences from the University of Erfurt in Germany. Her interest in Asian politics was shaped by a gap year in Malaysia, studies at National Chengchi University in Taiwan, as well as internship and research roles at the Taiwan Centre for Security Studies and Asia Centre. She is a Sparker, part of the Asia Sparks Research Coaching Program, working to broaden her understanding of Asia and refine her research expertise.

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The Year of the Horse has just begun and the red lanterns are still glowing in Beijing, as German Chancellor Friedrich Merz steps onto Chinese soil, accompanied by a delegation of 30 CEOs from large and mid-sized German companies. The symbolism of this timing is striking. Two days in China, carefully placed between the Spring Festival and the annual National People's Congress. A spot that seems to be reserved for "the visit of a friend" as Chinese President Xi Jinping reportedly described the visit at the beginning of their meeting. In Chinese diplomatic language, such phrasing is rarely accidental. It is Merz's first visit to China since becoming the German chancellor, around two years after his predecessor, Olaf Scholz, travelled to Beijing in 2024.

However, while Merz delivered his speech in Beijing, much of the overall Chinese population was still travelling home from its Chinese New Year celebrations. And as the crowds press forward through the Chinese railway stations, the news travel alongside them, slightly noticed, nevertheless unable to interrupt the pace. Because Beijing's narrative within its media outlets remains consistent. After the visits by the French, Finnish, and British heads of state in recent months, the message circulating domestically remains that one European statesman after another is coming to visit Beijing. The underlying narrative shared within the news is that Europe needs China. In this way, Europe is portrayed as increasingly dependent on stable relations especially amid global turbulence.

Back in Germany, major news outlets framed the visit as an opportunity for economic growth and renewed cooperation. Watching German evening news broadcasts, one could sense cautious optimism, as the chancellor laid focus on open dialogue, strengthening economic ties, and pragmatic engagement. In contrast to the heated debates of previous years about "systemic rivalry" and "de-risking," the visit was portrayed as constructive and forward-looking. In this way, it was mainly perceived as a success by the German population.

But what was behind the pictures with smiles and handshakes? The visit from the German side aimed at deepening German-Chinese relations and maintaining open channels of communication in an environment that has been increasingly fragmented in recent years. Merz sought to present Germany as a reliable yet self-confident partner. As the accompaniment of 30 German CEOs explains, economic cooperation stood at the centre of the agenda. This reflects the continued importance for Germany to sustain trade and industrial ties between the two countries. The chancellor wanted to position Germany as open to dialogue and cooperation, but aware of its own interests and strategic position. Consequently, criticism was voiced, but quietly. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine was mentioned, with the implicit appeal that Beijing would be in the possession of power to contribute to ending the war. In the economic sphere, concerns about Chinese overproduction, particularly in the car industry, were raised in diplomatic tones. Human rights issues were not central to the public messaging.

The major outcome of the visit, therefore, also remained economic, as China signalled interest in purchasing 120 Airbus aircraft. Airbus, Europe's flagship aerospace company, stands to benefit. However, these aircraft are produced in China. The direct impact on the European labour market therefore remains limited. Nevertheless, the goals of Friedrich Merz in achieving a friendlier tone, visible gestures of goodwill, and a sense of renewed connection have been met. But whether this meeting without diplomatic faux pas translates into any structural change remains open.

When Olaf Scholz visited China in April 2024, economic interests similarly dominated the agenda. Agreements were signed on automated driving and agricultural exports. At that time, handshakes appeared but change didn't really set in. However, the Merz trip appeared more overtly positive. Where Scholz was criticized for bringing primarily executives from large corporations, Merz made a point of including more representatives of German mid-sized so-called "*Mittelstand*" companies. This adjustment responds directly to previous criticism that smaller, often family-owned companies' risk being overshadowed in China's competitive environment. Diplomatically, Merz seemed to lean more heavily on symbolism. Whether this softer diplomatic style is bringing more effect than in the previous meetings remains to be seen in the past months.

Because there seems to be some inconsistency in Merz's diplomatic approach. At home, he speaks more critically. As seen at the Munich Security Conference, where Merz had framed Russia and China as partners within a broader geopolitical context. On site, he avoided direct confrontation, arguing that one should not "lecture" the host during a visit. This might be seen as diplomacy on the one hand, on the other it signals some inconsistency, one that the Chinese side criticizes on its European partners for a long time. While Merz's objectives have been clearer than Scholz's, this inconsistent approach in wording will be understood by the Chinese side and might work counter to the goals shared before Merz's departure.

This change in wording and diplomatic approach, might stem from a new environment that Germany faces since Trump's re-election in November 2024. Because what has changed most since the 2024 Scholz visit is not China but the United States. The United States represent an unreliable partner, one that openly communicated that Europe is to be weakened, even destroyed. Germany and Europe overall realized after several warnings by Trump and the Greenland case, that it needs to decouple from its long-term, historical partner - the US itself. The reliance on the US in Germany is historical, however, German politicians understand more than ever that it is time to redirect. Trust in long-term transatlantic reliability appears less self-evident than in the past years and the decoupling approach seems to fit to any of the great powers nowadays. Does Germany therefore question its recent China policy? The European Union and Germany have defined China as a competitor and systemic rival. After the Russian aggression, the European countries learned the hard way that overreliance brings risks and costs, therefore "de-risking" became central to European China policies. In this regard, one fact is notably important, before visiting China, Merz visited India. Beyond the positive wording during his visit to China, this sends a signal that diversification remains part of the strategy. Choosing India as the first big Asian country to visit, represents an important decision, a sign that signals the importance of decoupling. Following, it is not probable that there is going to be a profound change in policy towards China.

Beyond the wording also the content shared matters. Regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Merz argued that only three individuals could effectively end the war in Ukraine: Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin. China has influence, this is undeniable. However, it is equally undeniable that Beijing profits strategically and economically from its current positioning. The costs of openly distancing itself from Russia would outweigh the benefits from China's perspective to end the war in Ukraine. Therefore, it is most probable that there is no Chinese intervention in Russia's politics, which the German chancellor is most probably aware of. However, the joint press communiqué referred to the Russian aggression as the "Ukraine question." For Germany, signing such wording raises concerns. That cannot be the lowest common denominator. Ukraine was never a "question" for the German government, it was an unlawful aggression, which was acknowledged by Merz himself several times. Following, the signed common press communiqué should have been read twice as it is not a diplomatic wordplay but a move towards the Chinese position, which the German government is rarely sharing.

Another striking aspect, one that increased in the past years, is that the broader European messaging appeared faint. Before his departure, in 2024, Scholz coordinated explicitly with French President Emmanuel Macron. Merz stated that he had coordinated with European partners as well, yet no concrete details were made public. The EU dimension, once again, seemed underdeveloped in the public messaging. If European countries want to succeed in their policies, economic development, and wellbeing of their population, a shared approach and a broader European messaging would help to position themselves as strong and reliable. Because inevitably, if the European countries share one message and appear together instead of individually, they can only be stronger. In this way, more European coordination and an appearance together, would create a safer standing for Europe in every sector, in the economy as well as security.

The meeting was framed by both sides as a welcome meeting and a get-to-know-each other of the new German government. Therefore, this visit opens the question, what comes next? China's domestic economy is under pressure. Its internal market is weaker than in previous years. Beijing, too, needs stable export markets and Germany remains Europe's largest economy. Merz did not appear as a petitioner. That is significant. China presents itself as a modern high-tech nation, confident and forward-looking. But it is also navigating economic headwinds. The German China policy will therefore unlikely change in the short term. Engagement will continue, tensions will remain. China needs Germany. Germany needs access to China. But need does not automatically equal partnership. The real challenge is whether Germany and Europe can maintain strategic clarity while engaging in the way needed without recreating dependencies. Big gestures can open doors. Whether they produce lasting positive effects for both sides is another matter entirely. And once again, big gestures could be even bigger if they are shared by all European nations.

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