

Greens demand more coherent German policy on China

In a new strategy paper the Greens in the German parliament demand a better coordination of the German and European policy towards China

by Sven Hansen

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Already for a couple of years the German and Chinese governments characterize the bilateral relationship as „strategic“. This was underlined by the first governmental consultation of the two cabinets last year. However, the faction of the Green party in the lower house of the German parliament (Bundestag) misses a comprehensive strategic approach of the federal government towards China.

„The different ministries still pursue their own respective goals, processes of coordination are limited to the times times of state visits,“ the Green faction criticises in a policy paper on China, which was passed on May 8. Therefore a government coordinator for the relations with China is needed comparable for example with the coordinator of relations with the USA who exists for some time already. This is one of the demands of the 24 pages strategy paper.

For a more coherent and effective policy towards the People's Republic, Germany's policy should also take place more on the European level and be better coordinated there, the Greens demand. „The non-consistent positions of the EU-member states towards China make it easy for the Chinese leadership to play off one against the other,“ is given as reason. „Because of the enormous Chinese clout only a common European policy can claim values and interests towards China in an enduring and appropriate way.“

More international integration of China

At the same time the Greens have no illusions about the marginal European influence „in many policy fields“ as they state. Regarding security policy they see the EU only playing the role of a „promoter“ for a „reliable security architecture“. The paper argues: „Prospects for influence of the EU are based on its soft power and the relevance of the European market.“ The aim should be to integrate China internationally more strongly as a responsible actor and to strengthen cooperation in all fields. The Greens clearly reject a containment policy.

For the Greens it is in Germany's interest to support the development of China. And the bilateralisation of the relationship makes it more difficult to pursue German concerns towards China. Instead the People's Republic could become an ally in further developing the global multilateral framework, the Greens argue, because Beijing will more and more take part in the shaping of the international rules according to the growing importance of the People's Republic. At the same time the Greens realize that China like the USA tries to delay the further strengthening of the law in international relations.

Clear targets for dialogues on human rights

Regarding the dialogues on the rule of law and on human rights, which Germany and

China practice for a couple of years already, the Greens miss agreements on clear targets and on indicators allowing for „a better rating of the effectiveness“ of these dialogues. They should also be more opened towards civil society. In general relations should be more attached to discussions inside the Chinese society and it should be better understood that China is no monolithic actor.

The Green faction rates China's human rights violations negatively. Therefore the EU weapons embargo should continue. But for not triggering anti-Western sentiments in the debate on human rights, the Greens propose to more strongly point out the violations of China's own laws and its internal contradictions. At the same time there is a warning to use the aspired stronger Europeanisation of the China policy as a pretext not to deal with human rights issues in bilateral relations.

The paper of the Green faction was initiated by Viola von Cramon. She is a deputy member of the foreign committee of the federal parliament and speaker of her faction for the EU's external relations. In February she has been part of the multifactional parliamentary delegation accompanying chancellor Angela Merkel on her visit to China.

With drafting this first comprehensive China-paper of the Green party von Cramon also wanted to initiate an innerparty debate on the chances and challenges on the rise of China and its implications for global developments. The debate was successful in so far as the paper was not passed in time for the Hannover Fair in April. At the industrial show China had been the official partner this year and prime minister Wen Jiabao the guest of honour, which would have definitely helped the paper's attention if it would have been ready by then.

„More differentiated than usual“

Gudrun Wacker, China-expert at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SW) in Berlin sees the paper as positive. It tries to „draw a more differentiated picture than usual“, she argues. But at the same time she misses concrete examples in showing the lack of coordination of the policies towards China while she agrees that the German government lacks a formulated China-strategy. A strategy paper „could help in clarification and in providing a rough framework for all ministries,“ says Wacker. Before installing the China-coordinator as demanded by the Greens, she prefers to formulate more clearly the „interests and longterm goals the German China-policy pursues.“

Wacker remains sceptical towards the proposed harmonization of the China-policy at the EU-level. „The member states have very different interests regarding China, also economically,“ Wacker says. She proposes that at first a small group of EU-members should agree on key aspects and priorities and then try to enlarge the circle within the 27 member states.

Regarding the German-Chinese dialogues on human rights and the rule of law Wacker warns that the Western interest is stronger than the official Chinese one but concludes: „Alltogether there are made a couple of good proposals in the paper: Better preparation of the German participants, better coordination with the EU's human rights dialogue, more longterm perspective and also to take China's own laws as a starting point.“

First China-paper of a party faction

Until now no other faction of the federal parliament has published a China-policy paper. In

October 2007 the leading faction of the CDU/CSU (Christian democrats) inside the coalition government published an Asia-policy paper. It argued for a stronger orientation towards Western values and called for closer relations with Asian democracies like Japan, South Korea and India. Just before Chancellor Merkel had received the Dalai Lama, which made the relations with China plummet to a low point. Prematurely this had been interpreted by some already as a consequence of that paper, which in the end remained without practical impact. Instead it became obvious during the crisis in German-Chinese relations then that there had been not only a strong division between then Social-Democratic led foreign ministry and the office of the Christian-Democratic chancellor on how to handle the Tibetan spiritual leader. At the same time there had been an apparent lack of coordination which China could exploit.

The Greens strongly advocate a One-China-policy, but at the same time demand cultural self-determination for ethnic minorities. „The efforts are promising only where they cannot be denounced as provocation immediately. The basic principle therefore should be to refrain from demanding national sovereignty for areas of ethnic minorities and also of symbolism, which could be understood as this,“ the Greens demand.

In general the paper keeps within the mainstream of Germany's China policy with the slightly stronger rhetoric on human rights being typical for an opposition party. But regarding development cooperation the Greens take a different position as the current government coalition of Christian-Democrats and Liberals. Official development assistance had been phased out under the current minister Dirk Niebel (FDP). The Greens regard this as a fatal mistake, as the classical development cooperation had been ended already some time ago. China needs „offers for tailor-made projects and programs, dialogues and consultations. It goes without saying and is practiced already that the Chinese government pays the costs in part or fully,“ the Green paper argues.

The Greens hope that a more intense exchange with China is strengthening its civil society. At the same time they regard cooperation projects as „important means of influence“ to strengthen China's exchange and engagement with the international community. „Here we also do not only see a stronger need for cooperation within the German government, but also the need for bundling this on the European level.“

This article is an enlarged version of an earlier draft.

The German version of the strategy paper "Für mehr Kohärenz in der China-Politik" can be found here:

http://www.gruene-bundestag.de/fileadmin/media/gruenebundestag_de/fraktion/beschluesse/China.pdf

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