

GERMANY: The domestic politics behind the government's China policy

Following Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's visit to Beijing, the domestic debate about China policy continues among foreign policy elites. Compared to French President Emmanuel Macron, Baerbock took a more hawkish position. However, German foreign policy is made by coalition governments, not the president. As a result, Baerbock's stance must be considered in a more nuanced way.

Given Baerbock's role as foreign minister, her position reflects the official German line without necessarily representing the entire government's political views. As in many other areas of EU policy, Germany's more consensual domestic politics means that even within one government, diverging positions can often reflect different views taken on an issue by member states across the EU. Regarding China, Baerbock's Greens are, in broad terms, more skeptical than Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats (SPD).

Meanwhile, the third coalition partner, the Liberals (FDP), are somewhat less engaged than in the Russia debate. Since the last election, they also represent younger, more socially-liberal voters skeptical of Beijing, in addition to their traditional small-business constituency that has also become warier of China's geoeconomics over recent years. However, as the pro-business force within the government, competing with the opposition Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and advocating fiscal conservatism and competitiveness, the FDP cannot have an interest in an aggressive policy of immediate, politically-imposed decoupling.

These nuances in government and party positions must be considered when trying to gauge Germany's evolving position toward China. Divisions exist even within parties, but this is hardly reflected in reporting focused mainly on conflicts between the Greens and the SPD. As in the Russia debate, such a simplistic depiction underestimates the increasingly cross-cutting nature of the China question, curiously aligning, for instance, the more centrist parts of the SPD with the interests of large German industry groups structurally exposed to Beijing.

In fact, much of the commentary on SPD-Greens frictions should itself be considered part of an ongoing conflict among political and media elites interested in foreign policy. Tensions over China get entangled with broader rivalries over political leadership in the coalition, on the wider center-left, and ahead of the 2025 election.

Since the last Bundestag polls, disappointment with Baerbock's 2021 failure to succeed Angela Merkel and become Germany's first green chancellor has been especially pronounced among foreign policy elites, translating into a constant drumbeat of criticism for Scholz's lack of hawkish leadership. The chancellor, meanwhile, often seems to consider the debates in these circles as self-referential, instead betting on continued demand for calm pragmatism at the electoral center.

These conflicts have delayed the government's national security and China strategies. The former got stuck as Baerbock and Scholz could not agree on who would have the ultimate responsibility for a new national security council. Therefore,

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the framework for work on a more specific China strategy is still missing. As Germany's China hawks battle against those advocating a more measured approach, this also adds an extra level of irony to Macron's much-criticized China comments.

Many Germans are not necessarily opposed to calls for a more careful approach to China. However, Macron's public outspokenness, combined with his at least implicit claim to be speaking for all of Europe on a hugely divisive topic, instead have fueled German suspicions. As a result, the immediate rebuttal for Macron from German Atlanticists has remained effectively unchallenged in the domestic debate.

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