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German Strategy on China – A Critical Appraisal¹

Stefan Messingschlager

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Stefan Messingschlager is a Historian and Political Scientist at Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg. His research focuses on Contemporary Chinese History and Politics, with a particular emphasis on Sino-German Relations, the history of China Expertise, and German China policy since 1949. He is also engaged in policy advisory work, contributing to political discussions and academic debates on China's evolving role in the international order.

Introduction

It is difficult to imagine today's world without the People's Republic of China. The country's significance is immense. Over the past 20 years, trade with China has been the guarantor of prosperity for almost all Western countries; to effectively address global challenges such as climate change, China's active participation is necessary; geopolitically, the country also plays a crucial mediating role. Nonetheless, China frequently positions itself outside the framework of the rules-based international order.

Against this backdrop, Western countries have been discussing the possible contours of a revised stance toward the People's Republic of China for several years, aiming

¹ This commentary was first published on the SOAS China Institute Blog (German Strategy on China - A Critical Appraisal, in: SOAS China Institute Blog, February 15th, 2024, URL: <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2024/02/15/german-strategy-on-china-a-critical-appraisal/> (last accessed on February 15th, 2024)). The author would like to thank the editors of SCI Blog for their kind permission to republish this short analysis; special thanks go to Aki Elborzi for his attentive proofreading. In addition, I would like to thank the editorial team of the journal ASIEN for republishing this article and for the editorial work.

to counter the country's increased power consciousness and ambition to shape global affairs.² In this vein, in July 2023, the Federal Republic of Germany introduced the "Strategy on China"³, the first comprehensive concept paper on China policy issued by a European nation, attempting to address the aforementioned ambivalence in its relationship with China: It views China as a key partner in addressing global challenges, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival – especially in light of China's efforts to reshape the rules-based international order.⁴

After the paper's initial broad reception and discussion both nationally and internationally, little has been heard about the German Strategy on China six months post-publication. Is it, therefore, just another political concept paper that, although refined over 18 months by a wide range of actors at various political levels, a policy document that has largely remained without effect?

In this piece, I argue that the document is not being given its due if perceived merely as a strategy paper in the narrow sense, which, as has often been called for, something that should outline concrete steps on how Germany could reduce its structural economic dependency on China ("De-Risking"). Instead, in my view, the relevance of this paper lies within the document itself. It represents a significant political positioning with an importance that should not be underestimated, both domestically and internationally – in three respects:

The German Strategy on China as Political Self-Assurance

At its core, the German Strategy on China is a long overdue political self-assurance about Berlin's political stance towards China and bilateral relations with Beijing. For the first time, the paper outlines the guidelines for a German China policy in the 21st century.

2 See the position papers of the USA, the European Commission, and the G7 on the PRC: United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China (May 2020), in: National Archives, URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024); European Commission: EU-China – A Strategic Outlook (March 12th, 2019), URL: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-and-hrvp-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019_en (last accessed on February 10th, 2024); G7 Leaders' Statement (December 6th, 2023), URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/06/g7-leaders-statement/> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

3 Government of the Federal Republic of Germany: Strategy on China (July 13th, 2023), URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/strategy-on-china/2608618> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

4 Ibid., p. 8.

Although there have been foreign policy concept papers from the German Federal Government on the Asian region in past decades (1993 / 2002)⁵, comprehensive considerations on how to engage with China as a global power were previously unknown. The multidimensional view of China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival in the German Strategy on China is an attempt to categorize the complex reality of the bilateral relationship and to explicate the structuring conditions of its own China policy.

Supported by a broad societal consensus, Germany advocates for a greater assumption of responsibility by China within the rules-based international order, formulates guiding principles for the bilateral relationship, and at the same time emphasizes the importance of trade with China and the necessity of close cooperation to tackle global challenges.⁶

With this complex multidimensional perspective, Germany not only rejects the sometimes-popular binary friend-foe scheme, creating space for further bilateral exchange based on trust. It also concludes three decades of highly ambivalent German China policy, which—under the occasional guise of the modernization theory narrative of “change through trade” and supported by the influence of German corporations and business associations—had de facto narrowed down to the dimension of promoting foreign trade.⁷ The new strategy paper proactively addresses the systemic challenge of a China fundamentally transformed under Xi Jinping: China policy therein is still economic policy, but it is above all also multilateral foreign and security policy.⁸

Developed in Europe, Signaling for Europe

Although the document represents the Strategy on China of the German Federal Government, it was developed over many months through close exchange and consultation with politicians, parliamentarians, and academic China experts in

5 See the Asia concept of the German government from 1993 and the East Asia concept of the Federal Foreign Office from 2002: Deutscher Bundestag, 12. Wahlperiode: Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung: Asien-Konzept der Bundesregierung, Drucksache 12/6151, Berlin 1993; Federal Foreign Office: Aufgaben der deutschen Außenpolitik: Ostasien am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts, Berlin 2002.

6 Government of the Federal Republic of Germany: Strategy on China (July 13th, 2023) [as in note 3], pp. 9-13, 20-31.

7 See the relevant considerations in the Asia concepts: Asia concept 1993 [as in note 5], pp. 3-5; East Asia concept 2002 [as in note 5], p. 8; on the implementation of German China policy in the last two decades cf.: Ariane Reimers/ Vincent Brusee: Deutschlands China-Politik der vergangenen Jahre. Kritische Menschenrechtsdebatten im Bundestag – pragmatische Wirtschaftspolitik im Kanzleramt, in: MERICS Kommentar, October 8th, 2021, URL: <https://merics.org/de/kommentar/deutschlands-china-politik-der-vergangenen-jahre> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

8 Government of the Federal Republic of Germany: Strategy on China (13. Juli 2023) [as in note 3], pp. 48-57.

European capitals.⁹ The paper's core concept, the terminological triad of partner, competitor, and systemic rival, is no coincidence, deriving from the pivotal EU document "EU-China – A Strategic Outlook"¹⁰ from March 2019. The clear message intended by the China Strategy is that this is not a German unilateral action but rather a contribution to a new European China policy, both in its development and in terms of its defining principles.

As the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) has compellingly demonstrated in its assessment of China concept papers by European countries, the European Union is currently still quite far from a coordinated China policy that moves at least in a common direction.¹¹ However, the German Strategy on China appears to have a certain signaling effect – as the paper has been recognized in the critical commentary of European leading media as an important step towards a more coordinated European China policy. Particularly appreciated was the fact that Germany, despite its close economic intertwinement with China, is taking the lead and assuming foreign policy responsibility commensurate with its size and economic strength.¹²

Thus, the Strategy on China of the German Federal Government at least holds the potential to become a guideline for a new European China policy. The European debate on the German China Strategy was and is a first step towards the European Union increasingly perceiving itself as a geopolitical power and leveraging its political clout in dealings with China.

A New Basis in Bilateral Relations: Sober Realpolitik

The China Strategy not only signifies a profound self-assurance for German politics and a signal to Europe but also establishes a new realpolitik foundation for the bilateral relationship with China. The relationship between Germany and China appears to have matured; unlike before, it is no longer naively shaped by hopes and

9 Ibid., pp. 16-17.

10 European Commission: EU-China – A Strategic Outlook (March 12th, 2019) [as in note 2], p. 1.

11 Bernhard Bartsch/ Claudia Wessling (Ed.): From a China strategy to no strategy at all: Exploring the diversity of European approaches. A report by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), July 2023, URL: <https://merics.org/en/report/china-strategy-no-strategy-all-exploring-diversity-european-approaches> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

12 See among others Mercy A. Kuo: What to Make of Germany's China Strategy, in: The Diplomat, August 29th, 2023, URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/what-to-make-of-germanys-china-strategy/> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024); William Yang: Analysts: Germany's New China Strategy Prudent, Highlights Indo-Pacific, in: VOA, July 15th, 2023, URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-germany-s-new-china-strategy-prudent-highlights-indo-pacific-7182176.html> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024); Lily McElwee/ Ilaria Mazzocco: Germany's China Strategy Marks a New Approach in EU-China Relations, in: Center for Strategic & International Studies, July 14th, 2023, URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/germanys-china-strategy-marks-new-approach-eu-china-relations> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

expectations from the German side. Instead, German politics for the first time soberly and realistically formulates guiding principles for the bilateral relationship with China. Directed at the German economy, Berlin signals with its Strategy on China that despite the irreversible economic entanglement, it is unwilling to let this constrict its own political scope of action.¹³ Remarkably, for the first time in the history of German-Chinese economic relations, the German economy largely supports this policy.¹⁴

Europe is currently realizing that it can act from a position of political-economic strength: The Chinese economy is in a difficult situation, urgently dependent on foreign investments; meanwhile, foreign companies and investors have been withdrawing capital from China increasingly since mid-2023.¹⁵ The strong economic intertwinement with China can serve Germany and Europe as a vehicle to relax bilateral relations with Beijing on several levels communicatively while also addressing critical conflict points assertively. Signs are multiplying that the Chinese leadership has recognized the critical nature of the economic situation and is not only courting investments but also seems willing, at least economically, to move closer to trade reciprocity and address the domestic legal uncertainties that have led to a massive withdrawal of foreign investors.¹⁶ Such measures would be an important contribution to restoring foreign investors' trust.

However, the signal emerging from this European position of strength should not be confrontational, both internally and externally; it is rather one of a new sober realpolitik: China has risen to a world power, and Germany and Europe have no interest in hindering China's further political-economic development. Yet, for the first time, the Strategy on China also makes clear: both in trade and in foreign and security policy, the rise and growth of China must occur within the boundaries of the rules-based international order.

13 Government of the Federal Republic of Germany: Strategy on China (July 13th, 2023) [as in note 3], pp. 13, 25, 37-42.

14 Cf., for example, the positioning of the Federation of German Industries e.V.: China-Strategie der Bundesregierung - was sollten Unternehmen jetzt wissen? (January 2nd, 2024), URL: <https://bdi.eu/artikel/news/china-strategie-der-bundesregierung-was-sollten-unternehmen-jetzt-wissen> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

15 Dana Heide/ Moritz Koch: Deutsche Investoren meiden China, in: Handelsblatt, December 12th, 2023, URL: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/aussenwirtschaft-deutsche-investoren-meiden-china/100002179.html> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024); Ausländische Direktinvestitionen in China sinken, in: tagesschau.de, January 19th, 2024, URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/weltwirtschaft/china-auslaendische-investitionen-100.html> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

16 Gustav Theile: China wirbt um Vertrauen und stößt auf taube Ohren, in: FAZ, November 6th, 2023, URL: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/china-ministerpraesident-li-verspricht-besseren-schutz-von-investoren-19292834.html> (last accessed on February 10th, 2024).

Conclusion

The German Strategy on China is a remarkable document: it outlines a complex, multidimensional relationship with the People's Republic of China, confidently establishing a new basis for bilateral relations; developed in close consultation with numerous players in Europe, it also signals a new sense of responsibility in Germany's foreign policy, especially as Germany is China's most important trading partner in Europe. Last but not least, it also represents a national political self-assurance that breaks with the highly ambivalent German China policy of previous decades and outlines guiding principles for a new European China policy.

It is the strong economic interdependence that opens up the opportunity for a new sober China policy that enables the European Union to meet the People's Republic of China as an economically potent power on an equal footing. This policy of strength should be actively pursued by Germany and Europe – it might even become the central instrument for maintaining peace in the East Asian region in the medium term.

德国对中国战略的批判性评估¹

Stefan Messingschlager

在当今世界，很难想象没有中华人民共和国。这个国家意义重大。过去 20 年里，与中国的贸易几乎是所有西方国家繁荣的保证；为了有效应对气候变化等全球性挑战，有中国的积极参与是不可少的；但与此同时，中国却一再将自己定位在基于规则的国际秩序之外。

鉴于此背景，西方国家几年来一直在讨论对中华人民共和国（PRC）可能采取的修订立场的雏型，目的是反击该国增加的权力意识和塑造全球事务的野心。²在此背景下，德意志联邦共和国于 2023 年 7 月推出了《对华战略》。³这是欧洲国家第一份关于中国政策的综合概念文件，试图解决上述对华关系中的双重性问题：它将中国视为解决全球问题的关键合作伙伴、经济竞争对手，以及体制竞争对手——特别是鉴于中国试图重塑基于规则的国际秩序的作为。⁴

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- 1 这篇评论首次发表在 SOAS 中国研究所博客上（German Strategy on China - A Critical Appraisal, 在：SOAS 中国研究所博客，2024 年 2 月 15 日，URL: <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2024/02/15/german-strategy-on-china-a-critical-appraisal/>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 15 日））。作者想要感谢 SCI 博客的编辑们给予再次发表这篇简短分析的友好许可；特别感谢 Aki Elborzi 的细心校对。此外，我还想感谢《ASIEN》杂志的编辑团队重新发表这篇文章并进行编辑工作。
 - 2 参见美国、欧洲委员会和七国集团对中华人民共和国的立场文件：United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China（2020 年 5 月），收录于：国家档案馆，URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）；European Commission: EU-China – A Strategic Outlook（2019 年 3 月 12 日），URL: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-and-hrvp-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019_en（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）；G7 Leaders' Statement（2023 年 12 月 6 日），URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/06/g7-leaders-statement/>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）。
 - 3 德国联邦政府：中国战略（2023 年 7 月 13 日），URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/strategy-on-china/2608618>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）。
 - 4 同上，第 8 页。

《对华战略》最初在国内和国际上得到广泛接受和讨论，发表半年后关于该文件的消息却鲜有耳闻。因此，尽管经过 18 个月由各政治层面广泛参与者精心制定，这是否仅仅是一个在大体上仍未产生效果的政策文件？

在这篇文章中，我认为，如果仅仅将这份文件视为狭义上的战略文件，那么这份文件未得到应有的重视。正如人们经常呼吁的那样，该文件应概述德国如何减少其对中国结构性经济依赖的具体步骤。相反地，在我看来，这篇文章的重要性在于文件本身。它代表了一个重要的政治定位，其重要性在国内外都不应在以下三个方面被低估：

作为德国政治信心的《对华战略》

德国《对华战略》的核心是柏林对中国立场和与北京双边关系的长期政治信心。管德国联邦政府在过去几十年（1993 年/ 2002 年⁵）中曾多次发布关于亚洲地区的外交政策概念文件，但之前无从得知的是如何与中国这一全球大国打交道的全面性考虑。。《对华战略》将中国视为合作伙伴、竞争者和体制竞争对手的多维视角，是试图对双边关系的复杂现实进行分类，并阐明其自身中国政策的结构条件。

在社会共识的广泛支持下，德国主张中国在基于规则的国际秩序中需承担更大的责任，为双边关系制定指导原则，同时强调了与中国贸易的重要性以及应对全球挑战密切合作的必要性。⁶

透过这种复杂的多维视角，德国不仅拒绝了时下流行的二元敌友方案，在信任的基础上进一步创造双边交流空间，还结束了三十年来对中国高度模糊的政策，这一政策在打着现代化叙事理论「透过贸易实现变革」的幌子和德国企业及商业协会的影响下，实际上已经缩小到了促进对外贸易的层面。⁷新战略文件积极应对在习近平领导下发生根本性变革的中国及其所面临的系统性

5 参见德国政府 1993 年的亚洲概念以及联邦外交部 2002 年的东亚概念：Deutscher Bundestag, 12. Wahlperiode: Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung: Asien-Konzept der Bundesregierung, Drucksache 12/6151, 柏林 1993 年；联邦外交部：Aufgaben der deutschen Außenpolitik: Ostasien am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts, 柏林 2002 年。

6 德国联邦政府：中国战略（2023 年 7 月 13 日），【如注释 3 所示】，第 9-13 页，20-31 页。

7 参见亚洲概念中的相关考虑：1993 年亚洲概念【如注释 5 所示】，第 3-5 页；2002 年东亚概念【如注释 5 所示】，第 8 页；关于过去二十年德国对华政策的实施，参见：Ariane Reimers/Vincent Brusee: Deutschlands China-Politik der vergangenen Jahre. Kritische Menschenrechtsdebatten im Bundestag – pragmatische Wirtschaftspolitik im Kanzleramt, 收录于：MERICS Commentary, 2021 年 10 月 8 日，URL: <https://meric.org/de/kommentar/deutschlands-china-politik-der-vergangenen-jahre>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）。

挑战：其中的中国政策仍然是经济政策，但它最重要的也是多边外交和安全政策。⁸

在欧洲开发，为欧洲吹响号角

尽管该文件代表了德国联邦政府对中国的战略，但它是透过与欧洲各国的政治家、议员和中国学术专家进行密切交流和协商而开发的。⁹该文件的核心概念、合作伙伴、竞争对手和体制竞争对手这三位一体的用语并非巧合，而是源自欧盟的重要关键文件《EU-China - A Strategic Outlook》。¹⁰此战略明确想要传达的讯息是，无论是在发展还是在定义原则方面，都不是德国的单方面行动，而是欧洲对中新政策的贡献。

正如 Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) 在其对欧洲各国的中国概念文件评估中表明的那样，欧盟目前距离协调一致的对中政策（至少朝着共同方向前进）还很遥远。¹¹然而，《对华战略》似乎具有一定的信号效应——该文件在欧洲主流媒体的评论中被认为是迈向更协调的欧洲对中政策的重要一步。值得注意的是，尽管与中国经济关系密切，德国却率先承担与其规模和经济实力相称的外交政策责任。¹²

因此，德国联邦政府的对中国的战略至少有潜力成为欧洲新中国政策的指引。欧洲就德国对中国的战略展开的辩论，是欧盟日益将自己视为地缘政治大国并在与中国打交道时利用其政治影响力的第一步。

8 德国联邦政府：中国战略（2023年7月13日）【如注释3所示】，第48-57页。

9 同上，第16-17页。

10 European Commission: EU-China – A Strategic Outlook (2019年3月12日)【如注释2所示】，第1页。

11 Bernhard Bartsch/ Claudia Wessling (编辑): From a China strategy to no strategy at all: Exploring the diversity of European approaches. A report by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), 2023年7月, URL: <https://merics.org/en/report/china-strategy-no-strategy-all-exploring-diversity-european-approaches> (最后访问时间为2024年2月10日)。

12 参见其他来源，包括 Mercy A. Kuo: What to Make of Germany's China Strategy, 在: The Diplomat, 2023年8月29日, URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/what-to-make-of-germanys-china-strategy/> (最后访问时间为2024年2月10日); William Yang: Analysts: Germany's New China Strategy Prudent, Highlights Indo-Pacific, 在: VOA, 2023年7月15日, URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-germany-s-new-china-strategy-prudent-highlights-indo-pacific-7182176.html> (最后访问时间为2024年2月10日); Lily McElwee/ Ilaria Mazzocco: Germany's China Strategy Marks a New Approach in EU-China Relations, 在: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2023年7月14日, URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/germanys-china-strategy-marks-new-approach-eu-china-relations> (最后访问时间为2024年2月10日)。

双边关系的新基础：清醒的现实政治

《对华战略》不仅为德国政治和欧洲吹响号角，也为与中国的双边关系奠定了新的现实政治基础。德国与中国的关系似乎已经成熟，但与以往不同的是，德中关系不再由德方天真的希望和期望所塑造。相反地，德国政治首次清醒且现实地为与中国的双边关系制定了指导原则。柏林发布针对德国经济的《对华战略》，尽管存在着不可逆转的经济纠葛，但柏林不愿因此而限制自身的政治行动范围。¹³值得注意的是，在德中经济关系史上，德国经济首次大力支持这一政策。¹⁴

欧洲目前意识到可以从政治经济实力的角度采取行动：中国经济正陷入困境，迫切依赖外国投资；与此同时，自 2023 年年中以来，外商公司和投资人不断从中国撤资。¹⁵中国紧密的经济关联可以作为德国和欧洲在多个层面上缓和与北京双边关系的工具，同时也可以果断地解决关键冲突点。越来越多的迹象表明，中国领导层已经认识到经济形势的严重性，他们不仅在寻求投资，而且似乎在经济上愿意朝贸易互惠靠拢，并解决导致大量撤资的国内法律不确定性问题。¹⁶这样的举措将是恢复外资信任的重要贡献。

然而，欧洲这一强大实力地位所发出的信号不论是内部或外部都不应是对峙，而是一种新的清醒的现实政治：中国已崛起成为世界大国，德国和欧洲没有兴趣阻碍中国进一步的政治经济发展。然而，《对华战略》也首次明确指出：无论是在贸易还是在外交和安全政策方面，中国的崛起和发展都必须在基于规则的国际秩序范围内。

13 德国联邦政府：中国战略（2023 年 7 月 13 日）【如注释 3 所示】，第 13, 25, 37-42 页。

14 例如，参见德国工业联合会 e.V. 的立场：China-Strategie der Bundesregierung - was sollten Unternehmen jetzt wissen?（2024 年 1 月 2 日），URL: <https://bdi.eu/artikel/news/china-strategie-der-bundesregierung-was-sollten-unternehmen-jetzt-wissen>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）。

15 Dana Heide/ Moritz Koch: Deutsche Investoren meiden China, 在: Handelsblatt, 2023 年 12 月 12 日，URL: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/aussenwirtschaft-deutsche-investoren-meiden-china/100002179.html>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）；Ausländische Direktinvestitionen in China sinken, 在: tagesschau.de, 2024 年 1 月 19 日，URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/weltwirtschaft/china-auslaendische-investitionen-100.html>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）。

16 Gustav Theile: China wirbt um Vertrauen und stößt auf taube Ohren, 在: FAZ, 2023 年 11 月 6 日，URL: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/china-ministerpraesident-li-verspricht-besseren-schutz-von-investoren-19292834.html>（最后访问时间为 2024 年 2 月 10 日）。

结论

《对华战略》是一份值得注意的文件：它概述了与中华人民共和国复杂、多维的关系，自信地为双边关系建立了新的基础；该协议是在与欧洲众多参与者密切协商后制定的，它还标志着德国外交政策中的新责任感，特别是因为德国是中国在欧洲最重要的贸易伙伴。最后但很重要的一点是，它还代表了一种国家政治自信，打破了过去几十年高度模糊的对中政策，并为新的欧洲中国政策勾勒出了指导原则。

正是这种强大的经济相互依存关系，为欧盟制定新的清醒对华政策提供了机会，使欧盟能够以经济强国的身份与中华人民共和国这个经济强国平等相待。德国和欧洲应积极推行这一强势政策，它甚至可能成为在中期内维护东亚地区和平的核心手段。

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