

“Stop Talking about Germany Being Caught between Two Giants”

Berlin’s China policy as seen from France

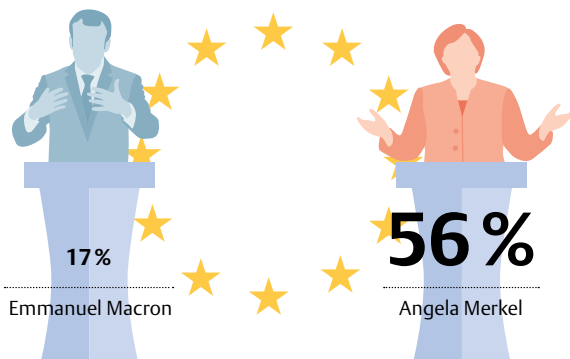
In their relations with China, France once owned politics, Germany economics. While de Gaulle and Chirac led strong declarative policies towards China, for parts of the 1980s Siemens alone sold more to China than did all of France. While German Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger had rather inchoately shouted “Kina, Kina, Kina!” as his vision for the future, the French thought they could be taken seriously in Beijing. Schröder went farthest towards China, as he did with Russia, while open disillusion broke out under Sarkozy’s watch. France has since diversified its partnerships in Asia, and its former illusions about China have not returned.



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Who has done more for the future of the EU?



2019: don't know 6%, no answer 2%

The surprise is Merkel. She initially had a very Kohl-like position: engagement focused on business goals, while leaving room for criticism – after all, Helmut Kohl had sacked a state secretary for the mistake of embracing then-Prime Minister Li Peng. Angela Merkel’s room for criticism has become wider – also depending on the political affiliation of any given foreign minister (were this France, one would have written “of her foreign minister”) and on the personality of the incumbent Federal President: none have ever spoken so strongly in China about human rights as Joachim Gauck in 2016.

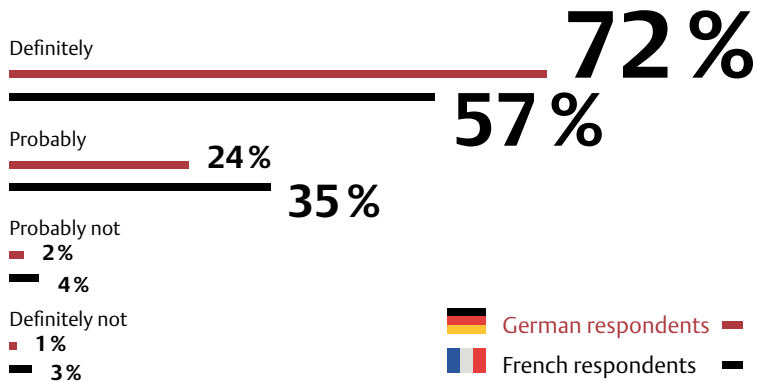
Who would have predicted that Mrs Merkel might endorse turning away China, as happened with the EU's refusal to grant Beijing market economy status, the EU's new investment screening law, as well as new trade defence measures? This remains a real surprise to the French, who had become only too accustomed to being alone and singled out in this type of venture, and for the Chinese, who had decided to take German human rights criticism in their stride so long as business ran as usual.

The problem is that Mrs Merkel's fine-grained policy ill-fits today's world. China's domestic politics are more repressive than at any time since the Cultural Revolution. It can make gifts to influential foreign companies, but if China is faced (as it may be before too long) with a choice between a free trading system and its party-driven and state-financed economy, it will choose the latter for the sake of Party survival. Being economically weaker, France may have a better feel for potential consequences.

In politics, France remains more hypocritical than Germany. France's official expressions about human rights are absent or formal. In truth, neither Chancellor Merkel nor President Macron have said much about the indignities suffered by Xinjiang's population – close to a crime against humanity. Both are very tepid about Hong Kong. But at least Mr Macron has forcefully expressed the need for a collective European China policy, including detailed propositions. Mrs Merkel will need to put her actual influence – which is still considerable – behind such a policy, ideally endorsing the latter at a European level.

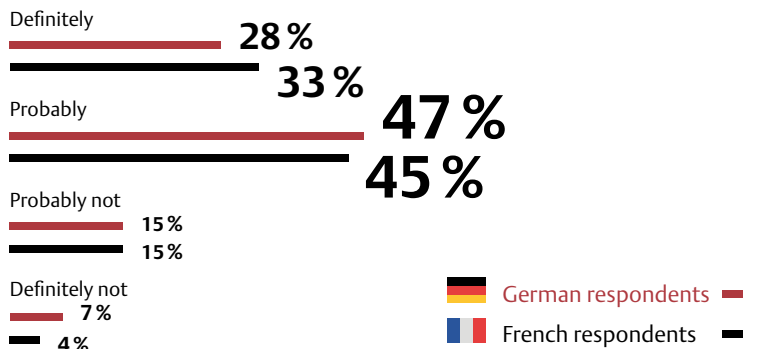
Please, stop talking about Germany caught between the two giants, China and the US. Germany is not little, and with the present French team it is in an ideal position to create effective action in Europe.

Should Germany / France co-operate with other nations to solve global challenges?



2019: don't know 1%, don't know 1%

Should Germany / France co-operate with other nations to solve global challenges even if this implies initially putting national interests in second place?



Only people answering yes to the first question were asked this question
 2019: don't know 2%, no answer 1%, don't know 3%

Source: representative survey conducted for Körber-Stiftung by KANTAR PUBLIC Germany in April 2019. (1000 interviewees, eligible to vote and aged over 18).
 French results: KANTAR PUBLIC France (1020 interviewees, eligible to vote and aged over 18) on behalf of Institut Montaigne, April 2019.
 All results: www.koerber-stiftung.de/survey-multilateralism

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