

Martin Albers. "Business with Beijing, détente with Moscow: West Germany's policy in a global context, 1969-1982." *Cold War History* 14:2 (June 2014): 237-257. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2013.817989. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.817989>

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR510>

Reviewed by **Roland Vogt**, The University of Hong Kong

The opening of archival files and the increasing accessibility of documents from the 1970s and early 1980s present a unique opportunity to shed light on the period which saw a remarkable transformation of ties between Communist China and Western Europe. Using a wide-ranging array of primary sources, Martin Albers's superbly crafted piece on West German China policy between 1969 and 1982 illustrates the extent to which an unexpected sense of pragmatism and cooperative spirit was able to emerge between China and West Germany. In the shadow of the Sino-Soviet split, President Richard Nixon's encounter with Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong, and U.S.-Soviet détente, relations between West European capitals and Beijing - both before and after Mao's death in 1976 - underwent a rapid and profound improvement. In 1969, only Britain, the Nordic countries, and France entertained some form of diplomatic ties with Beijing; by 1973, all West European countries - including the Federal Republic - had normalised their relations, with the exception of Portugal and Ireland. In 1975, Beijing became the first communist country to formalise ties with the European Economic Community (EEC). The 1970s were thus a period of intense diplomatic interaction, encompassing numerous first-time visits by West European officials, heads of government, and business delegations to Beijing.

Albers' focus on the modes, mechanisms, and motivations of Germany's China policy illustrates the significant challenges Bonn encountered in reacting to the turmoil in China and simultaneously nurturing a workable relationship with Beijing. Albers rightly claims that it was Chinese initiatives and not German strategy that mostly dictated the pace and scope of the relationship (256). Today, with Germany having established itself as the most important European partner for China, it is easy to forget how tentative and fragile Bonn's China policy was in the early 1970s. West Germany was not a member of the United Nations, it neither had ties with Beijing nor Taipei, and only a handful of officials in the

Auswärtiges Amt and the Federal Chancellory had any direct experience with Maoist China (let alone the ability to speak Chinese). In addition, as Albers clearly elucidates, Bonn represented the Western, capitalist half of a divided nation and its *Ostpolitik* towards Moscow was met with scepticism and mistrust in Beijing (see 239-240).

Pushed by German industry and business interests, who criticised the federal government's "neglect" of China (240), and afraid of being left behind other European countries, Bonn embarked on an increasingly intensive China policy that quickly dispelled Chinese doubts about its motives. These efforts were facilitated by a series of visits to Beijing by conservative politicians - Franz-Josef Strauss, Helmut Kohl, and Klaus Schröder - and culminated in Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's first visit to China in 1975. Despite the visit not having "specific strategic objectives" (242), Schmidt not only got along with Mao but also managed to impress on the Chinese the fact that Bonn's policy of détente with Moscow would not come at the expense of China.

Yet Bonn's China policy was not only shaped by considerations vis-à-vis the U.S. and the Soviet Union, but also by major transformative processes within the West German government machinery. First, it was in the 1970s that the Federal Republic emerged as a "*Handelsstaat*" (trading state),¹ becoming more nimble and adept at mobilising the country's trade and commercial prowess for political ends. Germany's proactive '*Außenwirtschaftspolitik*' (foreign trade policy) is a hallmark of its international presence until today and a remnant of the renewed self-confidence that first took root among West German officials in the late 1960s and, even more emphatically, in the 1970s. This mattered for Sino-German relations, since German industry - in particular the *Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft* - began to anticipate and identify China as a major new market for German exports at a time when the overall trade volume with China was relatively low and Beijing's handling of economic affairs was frequently erratic and unpredictable. The perseverance of German business pressure - so as to get government officials to explore and facilitate economic opportunities in China especially after the policy shifts of 1978-1979 - and the privileged access of German industrial lobbies to the federal government were crucial elements that enabled the subsequent success of German investment and joint-ventures from the late 1980s onwards. The emphasis on trade and commerce also helped to gradually "de-ideologise" Sino-German relations and to put the 'China factor' on the radar screen of West German decision-making.² Germany's instrumentalisation of its industrial and technological competitive edge continues to be a potent driver of engagement with China - and one that is not easily explained by strategic or geopolitical factors.

¹ Michael Staack, *Handelsstaat Deutschland, Deutsche Außenpolitik in einem neuen internationalen System* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

² Christoph Neßhöver, *Die Chinapolitik Deutschlands und Frankreichs zwischen Außenwirtschaftsförderung und Menschenrechtsorientierung (1989 bis 1997). Auf der Suche nach Balance* (Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde Hamburg: 302, 1999), 45.

Second, the 1970s also saw the conscious positioning of the West German government as a committed and generous donor of overseas development aid and technical assistance for developing countries. Bonn's institutional capacity to conduct what Albers calls "low-key projects" (256) - in areas as diverse as irrigation, agriculture, industrial development, education, and vocational training - turned out to be a helpful conduit for manifesting the usefulness of West German technical skills to Chinese officialdom and thereby enhancing the largely positive image Germany enjoys in China until the present.³

Last but not least, a development that unfortunately receives less attention in Albers's analysis, the 1970s saw the gradual emergence of institutionalised foreign policy cooperation - in the form of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) - among EEC member states, especially after Britain's accession to the Common Market in 1973. This included the growing competences of the European Commission to handle trade. While West European countries undoubtedly competed with each other economically when it came to market access to China (249), there was also a high degree of policy coordination and cooperation among EEC countries. Bilateral summitry among EEC partners frequently touched on China and there was a concerted effort to get Chinese leaders (who, in the 1970s, had little overseas exposure) to travel to Europe. Cooperation within the EPC allowed Bonn to mitigate against its relative lack of information and bureaucratic knowhow on China, and European integration in itself was warmly received by Mao, Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng, and Vice Premier Gu Mu as a bulwark against perceived Soviet expansionism.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the European dimension to West German China policy. Both for Willy Brandt and Schmidt, *Ostpolitik* was a pragmatic necessity, but one that required a solid commitment of the West German state to the transatlantic alliance, European integration, reconciliation with France, and close partnership with the U.S. The same was true of Bonn's opening to Beijing. There is little evidence to suggest that the building of relations with China ever altered the need to prioritise the complex demands of European integration over doing business with Beijing, thus limiting the extent of intra-European competition vis-à-vis China.

Roland Vogt is Assistant Professor of European Studies at the University of Hong Kong and Deputy-Director of the European Union Academic Programme (EUAP) in Hong Kong. His latest books include *European National Identities. Elements. Transitions. Conflicts* (with Wayne Cristaudo and Andreas Leutzsch, Transaction, 2014) and *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?* (Hong Kong University Press, 2012). He is currently completing a monograph on the diplomatic history of British and German

³ Xiaoman Xu, *Der Beitrag der deutsch-chinesischen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit zur Wirtschafts- und Politikreform in der Volksrepublik China* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1999).

China policy. He is also undertaking research on the role of party politics and parliamentary dynamics in Britain, France, and Germany on the conduct on European policy towards China.

© 2015 The Author.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).