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Germany's policy towards China – a change of attitude from tacit diplomacy to systemic rivalry

Introduction

Recent years have been marked by crises that have had a profound impact on states as they affect the steps they take in domestic politics and how they their agenda on the international stage is determined in response to disruptive events. These crises include the COVID-19 pandemic, rising international tensions, the most obvious examples of which, from a European perspective, are violent conflicts such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Israel's armed counterattack against Hamas; of key importance are also the wave of populism and the growing climate crisis. These difficult experiences are exacerbating mistrust between states, undermining crucial values in these relationships, often with the result that the norms that were once previously considered binding have now lost their status. They also lead to uncertainty in the social, economic and political spheres, cause social unrest, weaken the dynamics of economic growth and, as a consequence, can be associated with a loss of trust in those in power, which erodes the legitimacy of government.

This paper shows the results of a study on the changing attitude of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, Germany) towards the People's Republic of China (PRC, China). The analysis aims to identify the main framework of action *vis-à-vis* PRC – an important international player and, at the same time, a key trading partner for FRG. The discussed issues are the result of a change in strategy that materialises in party regulations and across party lines in the

German public space, as expressed in the 2023 Strategy of the Federal Government towards PRC (*China-Strategie der Bundesregierung*) adopted in 2023 (Die Bundesregierung 2023). Another topic of interest are the possible consequences of the observed changes on the shape of the contemporary political scene in FRG.

The main point of reference is the state of the FRG political system before the 2021 elections (Bräuninger, Debus, Müller & Stecker 2019; Schmidt, Schmid & Sewerin 2019; Kamińska-Korolczuk 2021). The analysis pertains to the parties whose representatives won seats in the *Bundestag* as a result of the 2021 elections. Preliminary findings suggest that changes in the international space affect not so much the rules of operation of the German state as the parties' attitudes towards violations of principles and values considered crucial for democracy, such as human rights. The changing rhetoric of the parties reflects the attitudes of the part of society – potential voters – who are convinced that democratic states have a moral obligation to react when fundamental values are being violated. On the other hand, it should also be noted that, as regards the response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the ongoing conflict in Israel and Gaza, representatives of certain parties which have also made their way into the *Bundestag* and their supporters are presenting views to the contrary.

Changes in the FRG political system are being studied in the context of *Zeitenwende* politics, which is a reference to a term used by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in a speech to the *Bundestag* on 27 February 2022 in Berlin (Die Bundesregierung 2022) and the cooperation among Germany's ruling parties in a coalition from 2021 onwards – the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD*); the Greens/Union 90 (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*) and the Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP*). Indeed, it should be emphasised that for the first time since the founding of Germany, the federal government is a coalition of as many as three parties.

The analysis was conducted by reference to the notion of *Zivilmacht* – the perception of FRG as a civil power. This paper assumes, like many other authors (Kirste & Maull 1996; Maull 2007, Wallraf 2021), that FRG plays an important role in international relations and fulfils the functions that are commonly attributed to superpowers, albeit a superpower of a civil character. We also notice studies that approach Germany's role in the international arena differently, e.g. as an economic power, geoeconomic power or as a reluctant hegemon (Kundani 2014; Szabo 2014; Bulmerand & Paterson 2013: 1, 387–405). FRG has appointed itself as the mediator and peacemaker in matters where restoring the harmony between conflicting states is of utmost importance. The ruling parties

see this mission as consisting primarily in maintaining proper relations with various actors on the international stage, protecting human rights and ensuring that military conflict in the world is not escalated. The paper seeks to expand our knowledge by demonstrating FRG changing policy towards PRC and other countries whose value systems differ from that of Germany. This shift is due to the increasing importance of ethical issues in FRG domestic politics.

Case, data, and research strategy

The research procedure consisted of analysing the electoral programmes which the relevant political parties presented before the 2021 elections. Following Giovanni Sartori, the relevant political parties were deemed to include those which have: 1) coalition capacity – they are or form a part of the government or are/were considered as a member of a coalition or 2) the ability to make use of political blackmail, which makes them able to affect the processes taking place in politics even when they are in opposition (Sartori 1976: 221–230). Also, Catherine E. De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt, referring to the concept of “challenger parties”, point out the importance of parties located on the ideological edges of the party division (De Vries & Hobolt 2020). So we assume that relevant political parties are those whose representatives obtained a seat in the *Bundestag* as a result of the 2021 elections. The study took into account the programmes of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU*), the Christian Social Union (*Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern e.V., CSU*), the Greens/Union 90, the Free Democratic Party, the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*) and the Left (*Die Linke*).

The paper asks the following research questions: 1. Did the major FRG political parties refer to the PRC in their electoral programmes for the *Bundestag* in 2021, 2. If so, which terms were used in relation to the PRC and which issues were emphasised, 3. Were the terms and challenges relating to the PRC used by the FRG parties reflected in the 2023 Strategy of the Federal Government towards China?

This study was conducted according to systematic literature review and an analysis of the identified documents, namely the 2021 electoral programmes of the parties in question and the text of the strategy. In analysing the documents, reference was made to the research tradition of neo-institutionalism, which assumes that of utmost importance are the institutionalised norms and values enshrined in the documents as well as the conduct of political ac-

tors, and thus qualitative research was conducted in line with the researcher's background and contextual knowledge regarding the issue in question (Wodak, Meyer 2001: 65). The following research procedure was used to analyse the content of the documents: original documents published on the websites of FRG parties were used; passages in which references to the PRC had been found were extracted; a synthetic discussion of this information was prepared, and terms used in relation to the PRC were identified. These terms were analysed using comparative and qualitative methods. The very same research procedure was used in the case of strategies. Subsequently, the researchers verified whether the terms used *vis-à-vis* the PRC and the reservations about Germany's policy towards the PRC were reflected in the strategy that was prepared. The final part of the study consists in drawing conclusions from the conducted analysis.

The paper presents the findings of an examination of the political programmes presented before the 2021 elections and the analysis of the strategy developed and adopted by the *Bundestag* in August 2023. The analysis was conducted by reference to the notion of *Zivilmacht* – the perception of FRG as a civil power, and the paper addresses the perception of the PRC by Germany's major political parties and the genesis and content of the adopted strategy determining changes to the relationship between FRG and the PRC. It draws attention to the shifting narratives of the political parties and presents attitudes that remain in opposition to this increasingly pronounced narrative.

Clarifying the character of German-Chinese relations

The relations between the Federal Republic of Germany, which was formed following the end of the World War II, and the PRC were established on the initiative of the PRC. This occurred as the PRC authorities sought to diversify the directions of international cooperation due to the growing rivalry for ideological leadership with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The first trade agreement between the FRG and the PRC was signed in 1957, and it stipulated that the cooperation could be carried out only by companies from the two countries covered by the agreement (Łysik 2006: 61-63). At the time, FRG followed the so called Hallstein doctrine, which defined Germany's foreign policy from September 1955 to October 1969 (Bundesarchiv 2022), according to which it was obligatory to maintain distance from countries cooperating with the German Democratic Republic which was formed on the territory of the Soviet occupation zone after World War II; that is the reason why the FRG au-

thorities opted against starting cooperation with the PRC, while not preventing entrepreneurs from establishing relations with Chinese entities.

The FRG-PRC relations were tightened under Chancellor Willy Brandt (in office from October 1969 to May 1974). It was during this time that intergovernmental relations were established. This practice was continued by subsequent chancellors: Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel. FRG's policy towards the PRC in that period is referred to as *a strategy of quiet diplomacy*. This term describes the form of cooperation which was mainly focused on economic issues, without touching on political and social topics. Such a model is suited to relations between states following different values. FRG recognised that 'change through rapprochement' was possible. This meant avoiding sensitive issues, such as human rights violations, while at the same time assuming, that by maintaining cooperation, the authorities of non-democratic states are gradually influenced and perhaps induced to introduce systemic changes, including democratisation (Kinzelbach 2014; Ciesielska-Klikowska 2021).

Today, the nature of the cooperation established in the 1950s is changing. This process is evident in the rhetoric of both leading political parties and the narrative of the authorities. The main feature of the relationship between FRG and the PRC is distance (Ulatowski, Hills 2022), i.e. the consistent treatment of the Asian trading partner with growing reserve. This process is reflected in the declarations contained in the electoral programmes of the major German parties, which were drafted before the 2021 *Bundestag* elections and the introduction of the Strategy of the Federal Government towards China in 2023.

The People's Republic of China under Xi Jinping has consistently pursued a development model geared towards achieving dominance on the international stage (Khan 2018; Potulski 2019; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018, 2022). Therefore, its foreign policy is thus characterised primarily by organisational, economic and financial dynamism and the intensification of infrastructure project beyond its borders (Markey 2020, Góralczyk 2022). PRC investment is noticeable on every continent (Morozowski 2018; Mickiewicz 2022), with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI 2022) being its flagship programme. Of course, while this project is economically significant, its role is – first and foremost – political and it serves the goal of strengthening the PRC's position as a superpower in the international arena (Shambaugh 2016; Tomaszewska 2019; Kamińska-Korolczuk 2021).

FRG, recognising the changes taking place within the international order, wants to retain its status as an international leader. Good relations with the PRC, one of the two countries with the greatest economic potential besides the US, are therefore crucial for FRG.

The attitude of German major political parties towards the People's Republic of China – conclusions from an analysis of the electoral programmes prepared for the 2021 *Bundestag* elections

The electoral programmes prepared by the major FRG parties ahead of the 2021 *Bundestag* elections contain various references to the PRC. Each of the parties calls for cooperation with the PRC; most of them, excluding *Die Linke*, however, insist that cooperation take place in a spirit of dialogue and on the basis of equality between the parties and not the domination that the PRC is trying to impose. Only *Die Linke's* programme shies away from clearly stating that the PRC has serious influence on the international order and is one of the dominant states. Three parties, the *CDU-CSU*, the *SPD* and the *FDP*, explicitly use terms which indicate that China is a systemic rival, a competitor. The *AfD*, on the other hand, uses the term 'partner', clarifying that only in trade, while *Die Linke* discusses the topic of the PRC by way of negation – it refuses to describe the PRC as a competitor or enemy. In the view of the *CDU-CSU*, *SPD*, *FDP* and Greens, China competes with and even violates international law (this is explicitly stated in the *FDP* programme). However, it is noted that without China, economic and climate change will not be possible. Only the *SPD* does not use a single epithet to refer to the PRC in its 2021 electoral programme. This observation is particularly relevant given that after winning the 2021 *Bundestag* elections, the *SPD* formed a coalition with the Greens and the *FDP*, adopting the rhetoric of its coalition partners towards the PRC, as reflected in the 2023 strategy. A summary of the terms used in relation to the PRC is included in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of terms used in relation to the PRC and perceptions of the PRC's role as reflected in the 2021 election programmes of FRG political parties

	Terms used	Preferred type of cooperation	Perception of the PRC's role in the world
<i>CDU-CSU</i>	competitor cooperation partner systemic rival	equal negotiations on the basis of partnership and fair competition	affects international order
<i>SPD</i>	none	dialogue in cooperation and competition constructive and critical communication	Without Beijing, 'it is difficult to imagine a global response to the economic, environmental, social and political challenges of our time'

<i>FDP</i>	systemic competitor authoritarian regime autocratic regime authoritarian system of government	developing EU-China relations irrespective of systemic rivalries exchange based on and in accordance with applicable international law, UN, WTO and ILO rules EU-China dialogue	exerts political influence on other states competes systemically violates international law
Greens/ Union 90	European competitor partner systemic rival	constructive dialogue desiring cooperation where China is prepared to cooperate constructively	making social and environmental changes in the world will not be possible without China China is forcing other countries into economic and political dependence, but also wants to divide Europe
<i>AfD</i>	trade partner	cooperation only on the conditions of equality and fairness in a structured legal framework for trade and investment opposition to continuing the sales of German and European technology	the challenge is China's growing influence in the world
<i>Die Linke</i>	there is no consensus on whether to refer to China as a competitor China is not the enemy	cooperation, disarmament and the thawing of international relations	should not be seen as a competitor or an enemy

Own study based on: *CDU-CSU 2021; SPD 2021; FDP 2021; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2021; Die Linke 2021* and Kamińska-Korolczuk 2022.

Equally interesting are the issues concerning the most important facts which at the present time impact the PRC's image on the international scene. An analysis of the parties' electoral programmes shows that half of the parties in question do address China's human rights abuses or pressure on Taiwan and Hong Kong, while half neglect to do so. The parties that draw attention to the PRC's human rights violations and raise the issue of Taiwan and Hong Kong are the *SPD*, the *Greens/Union90* and the *FDP*. The *AfD*, on the other hand, ignores these sensitive topics in its electoral programme, declaring support for PRC initiatives, which is probably due to the perceived economic interdependence between FRG and the PRC. *Die Linke* adopts the view that European states that are members in alliances that provoke retaliation by the PRC and

Russia are responsible for aggressive actions by China or Russia. It is also important to note that one of Germany's most important political parties, the CDU-CSU coalition, does not address the issue of human rights violations by the PRC at all. The subject at hand is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of references to PRC human rights violations, Taiwan and Hong Kong issues in the 2021 electoral programmes of FRG political parties

	Attention to human rights violations by the PRC	Taiwan's situation	Hong Kong's situation
<i>CDU-CSU</i>	no references	no references	no references
<i>SPD</i>	condemns serious human rights violations against minorities, particularly Uyghur Muslims	observes the increasing pressure with concern	the principle of 'one country, two systems'
<i>FDP</i>	no tacit acceptance of violations of human rights and the rule of law considers the unprecedented technical surveillance of the population and repression of ethnic and religious minorities as contrary to China's obligations under international law internment and forced sterilisation of members of ethnic minorities contributes to accusations of genocide support for targeted sanctions by the EU against Chinese officials responsible for human rights violations	supports the development of democracy and the rule of law in Taiwan supports Taiwan's efforts to integrate into international organisations reunification of China and Taiwan only through peaceful consensus allowing the people of Taiwan to freely decide their political future	condemns the national security law introduced and the new electoral law condemns the criminalisation of democratic protest, oppression and repression the principle of 'one country, two systems'
Greens / Union90	China is systematically undermining human and civil rights through its authoritarian pursuit of hegemony demands an end to blatant human rights violations, for example in Xinjiang and Tibet human rights violations are taking place in Xinjiang, for example Germany 'should campaign for a fact-finding mission to Xinjiang within the UN Human Rights Council and name the persecution of the Uyghurs as an international crime.' China to end all forms of forced labour	accepts the one-China policy of the EU no consent for forcing the Taiwanese people and authorities to reunify with the PRC	demands an end to blatant human rights violations accepts the one-China policy of the EU

<i>AfD</i>	no references	no references	no references
<i>Die Linke</i>	no references	no references	no references

Own study based on: *ibidem*.

It should be noted that each of the major FRG political parties with representation in the *Bundestag* in the current 2021–2025 term included information relating to the PRC in their 2021 electoral programmes. It can therefore be concluded that PRC is an important subject of interest for each side of the political scene. However, what varies are the perceptions of actions undertaken by that country, as demonstrated in the analysis above. Some of the parties refer to the PRC by using terms that explicitly define it as a competitor state, while the FDP calls PRC explicitly ‘an authoritarian regime’. Half of the parties in question raise sensitive issues in their programmes, such as the PRC’s human rights abuses, violations of the international order or pressure on Taiwan and Hong Kong, while the other half completely ignore them.

The attitude of the German government in the 2021–2025 term towards the People’s Republic of China – conclusions from the analysis of the Strategy of the Federal Government towards China

On 13 July 2023 the German Federal Government adopted the Federal Government Strategy towards China. As specified on the website of the *Deutsche Welle*, the strategy ‘is a balancing act between economic benefits and political principles’ (Deutsche Welle 2023). The strategy is a sixty-one-page document containing guidelines regarding the policy that FRG should pursue towards one of the world’s strongest countries, a country that has been closely linked to the German economy for many years. The study is the result of months of negotiations between the coalition parties forming Chancellor Scholz’s cabinet. The Federal Foreign Ministry also extended invitations to a diverse group of scholars, think tankers, businesspeople, and local governments. The process was marked by significant tension between the Ministry and the Chancellor’s Office (Global Times 2023). The document reflects the shift in German politics under the influence of international developments and respects public attitudes in contemporary Germany – for example, in May 2022, 68 per cent of German citizens believed that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine represented a turning point in their country’s foreign policy (Clark 2022). The government thus responded to the

needs of society by changing its stance towards countries with which FRG has until recently been linked by close cooperation, often disregarding the ethical issues strained by entering into such alliances. The shift in the attitude towards the PRC is therefore pro-equality. The parties co-forming the ruling coalition have adapted to the expectations of the electorate who, in no uncertain terms, expressed that it is important for them to keep the moral high ground in FRG's foreign policy. Thus, the strategy towards China is, on the one hand, a response to social needs and, on the other hand, a search for a balance between prudently maintaining relations and doing business with a state that violates the principles of international law relating to, for example, human rights. At the same time, it is a country with whom one cannot sever ties completely for a variety of reasons, including, most importantly, economic ones.

After the 2021 elections, a cabinet coalition was formed in FRG consisting of parties that are sceptical of PRC and clearly express their concerns towards the country – the *FDP* and the Greens – and a party that up to that point avoided explicit declarations regarding possible avenues of cooperation or maintaining distance from the Asian superpower – the *SPD*. Although O. Scholz represents the *SPD*, which until then refused to make clear statements on the PRC in its political programme, the three-entity coalition meant that the main party was forced to pay more attention to the demands of the smaller parties in the government. The prepared strategy is basically a reflection of the views of the Greens and the *FDP* towards the PRC. It can therefore be seen that the need to run a coalition government, with strong coalition partners, is changing the rhetoric of declarations and the previously used language of avoiding clear stances on problems has changed, perhaps permanently, into the language of clearly expressed interests.

Presenting the strategy to the public, FRG Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that cooperation with China would continue, but that issues such as the PRC's violations of human rights, the rule of law and fair competition would not be overlooked from now on. The strategy constitutes a reaction to the fact that China is 'changing and adopting a more offensive posture' (ZDF 2023). Federal Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Green Party stated: 'for Germany, China remains a partner, a competitor and a systemic rival', thus repeating the terms used by the party she represents. The minister noted that China had changed, so the policy towards China should change as well, and that the strategy should be a compass setting a framework for cooperation, not a document preventing such cooperation (ZDF 2023).

The Strategy of the Federal Government towards China consists of: 1. an introduction; 2. a discussion of Germany's strategy towards China within the

framework of a common EU-China policy; 3. a discussion of bilateral relations with China; 4. a presentation of the notion of strengthening Germany and the EU; 5. a delineation of the principles of international cooperation; and 6. an emphasis on the importance of coordinating China's policy and China's value for the world (Die Bundesregierung 2023). The FRG strategy is therefore a document that goes significantly beyond simply setting out Germany's policy towards China. It refers to measures undertaken by FRG as a member of the international community, including such organisations as the UN, NATO and the EU, and as a state that pursues an independent, but aligned policy with the alliances referred to above. The strategy on numerous occasions addresses several key issues. These are: 1. human rights, defined as broadly as possible in the modern world of democratic values; 2. principles of cooperation in every relevant field: economic, cultural or scientific, based on a balance of power and fair competition as well as technological and cyber security; 3. declarations on the non-escalation of conflicts on the international arena and incentives to seek a balance on sensitive issues which require the involvement of the entire world, such as the development of societies, peacekeeping and efforts to prevent or mitigate climate change; 4. the strategy also emphasises the key role of FRG in international and European structures and the desire to continue and expand this cooperation.

The strategy underlines FRG's role as a civil power in the spirit of the *Zivilmacht* and expresses the need to review relations with the PRC along the lines of the *Zeitenwende*. It describes FRG's relations with the PRC to date, the changes introduced, which should henceforth be consistent at every level of the federation and in every sphere of activity – in economy, culture and research – and indicates the perspectives for maintaining further relations. It also clearly specifies which values are key for FRG and which will continue to define foreign policy towards the PRC in the future. Moreover, it emphasises the need to strengthen European unity in order to develop the resilience of societies, the economy and research, while maintaining an open system. It seems that, according to the authors, the strategy should fulfil the following objectives – defining the dimensions of bilateral cooperation with China in accordance with the values preferred by the majority of German society, strengthening FRG's position on the international stage and within the EU, and convincing international opinion of the need to cooperate and maintain a united front towards PRC.

In the preliminary findings, it is explained that the document contains instruments and defines standards that will be used in cooperation with China without compromising the quality of this cooperation and, at the same time,

the standards considered important in Germany. It is understood that such a perspective increases the guarantee of not succumbing to PRC influence, which is currently significant. The introduction of the document also specifies that the strategy does not entail any additional costs for the budget. One can assume that this statement serves to rebut possible accusations that may come from various sides that, in the face of economic difficulties gripping both FRG and Europe, resources are being spent to protect values. The strategy contains very clear and explicit declarations that leave no illusions and do not mask reality. They are identical to the statements that the *FDP* and the Greens used in 2021 in their electoral programmes. The terms used provide the basis for the future relationship, but do not exclude far-reaching cooperation, as is evident in the further points of the strategy. The PRC's potential for influence is neither depreciated nor overstated. Section 1.3. of the strategy refers to China by using the words borrowed from the electoral programmes of the *FDP* and the Greens: partner, competitor, systemic rival.

Section 1.4 of the strategy contains a reference to respect for human rights and the rule of law. It is stated that human rights cannot be relativised, are inalienable, universal and valid everywhere in the world, and are the most important value in the policy pursued by the FRG Federal Government. This provision also emphasises FRG's role as *Zivilmacht*, stating that: 'Germany is committed to promoting and upholding universal human rights' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11-13).

The strategy document also declares that 'China exerts a decisive influence on all key issues of our world order', while specifying that the German federal government 'seeks to cooperate with China, especially as an indispensable player in solving central global challenges' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11). One of the first challenges is China's commitment to reduce CO² emissions, of which it is the largest emitter, emphasising, however, that the PRC is also the largest producer of renewable energy and that without it, neither the climate crisis nor the pursuit of sustainability and biodiversity of the global environment will be possible. It will also be difficult to prevent pandemics and provide goods that involve global public security (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 10, 27). That climate issues have been prioritised in the strategy is not surprising, as they have long been central to German public opinion and are on all the agendas of Germany's relevant political parties. The strategy emphasises that the systemic rivalry between FRG and the PRC is primarily reflected in the differences in values considered preferable, including attitudes towards human rights and territories that China claims as its own, which involves a different approach to the principles of maintaining

international order. The strategy also does not ignore the systemic changes taking place in China, including the desire of the party commanders to assume a key role in global leadership. The FRG strategy explicitly states that 'the German government is concerned about China's efforts to influence the international order according to the interests of its mono-party system and thus to relativise the foundations of a principled order, such as the position of human rights' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 10). This is a very important statement, another one which clearly declares that there are principles followed by China that are unacceptable for those states which value equality and respect diversity. The document boldly presents the dissimilarity of the two worlds – democratic and non-democratic, stating that 'with the strengthening of the Chinese Communist Party (...) there has been a regression in civil and political rights, including freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The cultural expression and identity of ethnic and religious minorities are also under pressure. Examples of this include *inter alia* human rights violations in the autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, as reported by the United Nations. In Hong Kong, contrary to its promises and obligations under international law, Beijing has undermined the city's autonomy, restricted civil liberties and political freedom of action' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 20). The FRG government declares that it will openly address the observed problems by advocating various forms of dialogue.

Human rights, which are an important part of the document, are also the subject of a separate subsection 3.3. entitled 'Respect for human rights', which refers to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a convention containing universal principles applicable to all people in the world (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 24-25).

As previously mentioned, the bilateral cooperation between FRG and the PRC is key for German policy, as China is Germany's largest trading partner. A risk, however, has been identified in this cooperation due to the fact that Germany's dependence on China is too strong and China's dependence on Germany, or, more broadly, on Europe, is weakening. While the systemic rivalry with China does not mean that cooperation is impossible, as China is an economic, technological, military and political power, the decisions taken by the PRC to date have resulted in an intensification of global rivalry. The FRG federal government recognises this problem and, in order to minimise the risk of becoming entangled in this rivalry, it will favour cooperation on fair terms. The strategy states clearly: 'our relationship with China suffers from numerous asymmetries' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 13). Cooperation with PRC, especially when violations of fair competition rules can be proven, is a risk and

this risk, according to the strategy, FRG will limit. The principles of economic relations are discussed in section 3.4 of the strategy.

Another important section of the strategy – 3.5 – pertains to the protection of the climate, environment and biodiversity. As previously mentioned, representatives of the federal government have no doubt that without cooperation with the PRC on this matter, the desired outcome will be unachievable. This view was also expressed in the 2021 electoral programmes of the *SPD* and Green parties, both of which stated that without China, a global shift in addressing the ecological challenges of the modern world would be impossible. Similarly important is also the broadest cooperation possible in the development of education, science and research, which is also highly dependent on improved relations with the PRC. This issue is raised in the strategy in section 3.6 and continues in section 3.7, which outlines the Agenda 2030 assumptions involving cooperation with China to provide and protect global public goods for sustainable development (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 29-31).

The fourth section of the strategy, calling for the strengthening of FRG and the EU, once again draws attention to the PRC's systemic competition with other states and organisations, which is more and more detrimental to the global balance as the time goes on. Also discussed are policies concerning local markets and the EU internal market, matter of supply chain diversification, which is a problem that was exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and technological sovereignty in crucial areas that should, the strategy states, be independent of third countries that do not interact within the EU. Furthermore, the document tackles the risks of operations in the Chinese market and the trade instruments that can be used to mitigate these risks. Particular attention is given to cyber security. Section 4.10 outlines security issues in this area, recognising China's impact on threats emerging in the digital space around the world, and technology security – section 5.3 – which relates to key technologies such as semiconductor manufacturing, green technologies or implementation of artificial intelligence.

The strategy of the FRG federal government is also a lecture on the need for global cooperation and changes within the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or the United Nations due to PRC's increasing power to exert an impact on these entities. Areas of aggressive, as it was called, PRC policy were identified, where measures are taken in violation of the principles of international law. The document mentioned, *inter alia*, China's actions as a member of the United Nations – reminding that China's contributions are slim when compared to its economic potential, role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, relations with Russia, particularly after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, or

its efforts to gain leverage in the Indo-Pacific region. According to the strategy's authors, both security policy and international cooperation depend on the PRC's participation and attitude, so arms control and the intensification of confidence-building measures are necessary despite systemic differences (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 52-57).

The document prepared by the federal government repeatedly mentions that the PRC's achievements should be respected. It states, for example, that 'thanks to its great diversity, China has made great achievements that are also admired in Germany' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11). Cooperation with Chinese society enriches Germany, Europe in general, and China alike. However, while the benefits should not be disregarded, the costs of these changes must not be ignored either. The authors of the strategy unequivocally state that 'the bilateral relations should be based on the widest possible exchange between civil societies' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: 11), which is something that is not present the PRC at all. It should also be emphasised that the strategy does not negate the One-China policy. The document stresses that 'the One-China policy remains the basis of our actions. Diplomatic relations exist only with the People's Republic of China. Germany maintains close and good relations with Taiwan in many areas and wishes to expand them. Within the confines of the EU's One-China policy, we support the appropriate participation of democratic Taiwan in international organisations. A change in the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait must be peaceful and effected only by mutual consent. A military escalation would also damage German and European interests' (Die Bundesregierung 2023: quote 13, 23, 25).

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the conducted analyses show that the attitude of the FRG authorities towards China is very firm and was clarified after the three-party coalition, the first of its kind formed in Germany after the Second World War, assumed power. This distinctive position is a result of adapting to the changing political context *vis-à-vis* the PRC, also in the EU. This is significant because it is in line with the rhetoric concerning other countries diplomatic relations with whom, in the hope of systemic change, have failed. The strategy also highlights the role FRG still wants to play on the international stage.

The paper answers the research questions: 1. In their electoral programmes for the *Bundestag* in 2021, all major FRG political parties did refer to the PRC. The PRC is an important actor in international politics and at the same time

a country with which Germany has extensive contacts, particularly in the economic sphere. The parties starting in the elections to the *Bundestag* cannot thus simply disregard these issues and fail to mention them in their manifestos. 2. Various names have been used in relation to the PRC, as shown in Table 1, and the *SPD* is the only party whose programme does not use any epithet to refer to the PRC as a state. It should be noted that the terms used are a reflection of the profile and views professed by the parties. The *FDP* and Green parties used the strongest expressions, such as ‘competitor’ or ‘systemic rival’. The dominant parties within *CDU/CSU* and the *SPD* avoided one-dimensional terms. In the case of the *SPD*, this only changed after the party took power in 2021. As, however, follows from an analysis of the manifestos, half of the parties in question made no mention of events that informed the perception of values that the PRC stands for. The programmes of the *CDU/CSU*, *AfD* and *Die Linke* failed to refer to any human rights violations, the situation of Taiwan or Hong Kong. The *SPD*, on the other hand, clearly and unequivocally expressed its concern about all the issues referred to above. The *FDP* and the Greens, once again, were the most articulate and unambiguous in their negative stance towards the PRC. 3. The third question – Were the terms and challenges relating to the PRC used by the FRG parties reflected in the 2023 Strategy of the Federal Government towards China? – can be answered in the affirmative. Yes, all the issues contained in the electoral programmes of the political parties currently (term 2021–2025) forming the government coalition are reflected in the strategy prepared by the federal government. This new framework defining the principles of cooperation policy with the PRC stems from crises – the 2015 refugee crisis, the COVID crisis and the Russia-induced conflict. It entails the need to redefine attitudes towards countries that were previously regarded as partners, despite the perceived clear ideological differences. However, these events have had such an impact on German public opinion, as confirmed in the results of the election and the formation of a new – in terms of the views expressed and the number of parties involved in the coalition – government led by the *SPD*, that they are difficult to ignore. Under the *SPD*, a party that had previously been in opposition or in a coalition role with FRG’s second largest party, the *CDU*, for fifteen years, new forms of cooperation between FRG and non-democratic states are thus being created.

The paper has demonstrated that, although some of the FRG parties are adopting a less principled stance with regard to the PRC, this is a reflection of general differences regarding most of the crucial issues relating to the role that the European Union and the world’s leading states are to play and does not affect the main line of the German authorities. New policies that emerge

stem from successive crises that FRG and the world are experiencing. Criticism of the PRC in Germany is sharpening and one can see a pattern whereby the policy towards the PRC is being tightened based on highlighting the differences between values respected in Germany and those not recognised or displayed in China. Factors related to economic dependencies do not take the first place, but give way to the specific value system. Criticising the policy implemented by the PRC, however, does not imply a rejection of existing cooperation, but serves to emphasise that this cooperation will be based on different foundations than before. The value hierarchy is clearly demonstrated both in the political programmes of the parties and in the strategy towards the PRC adopted by the FRG federal government in 2023. However, it should be stressed once again that a tough stance towards the PRC does not preclude cooperation between the two countries, which is of crucial importance for the German economy.

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Keywords: Germany-China, Sino-German relations German political parties, Germany's strategy towards China

ABSTRACT

The study presents the analysis results of the electoral programmes developed by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) parties for the 2021 Bundestag election campaign and from the Strategy of the Federal Government towards People's Republic of China (PRC) (China-Strategie der Bundesregierung) adopted in 2023. The analysis pertains to the parties whose representatives won seats in the Bundestag as a result of the 2021 elections. We ask the following research questions: 1. Did the parliamentary FRG political parties refer to the PRC in their electoral programmes for the Bundestag in 2021? 2. If so, which terms in relation to the PRC were used and which issues were emphasised? 3. Were the terms and challenges relating to the PRC used by the FRG parties reflected in the 2023 Strategy of the Federal Government towards PRC? This study was conducted according to systematic literature review and an analysis of the identified documents. The analysis shows that the programme

of each and every FRG political party with representation in the Bundestag for the 2021–2025 term contained references to the PRC. The PRC is therefore a relevant subject for all relevant FRG parties. However, these parties differ in their perception of the PRC's role, which is also reflected in the strategy towards PRC prepared by the parties forming the federal government in the current term (2021–2025).