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‘Domesticating’ China Through Economics? The Logic of West Germany’s China Policy 1974–1990

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Was West Germany’s China policy economically driven, and since when? Amid growing concerns over value-based and systemic rivalry, recent scholarship has foregrounded the economic dimension of Germany’s China policy. This article argues that, although economic interests gained prominence in Sino–German relations by the late Cold War, they were fundamentally underpinned by strategic considerations. Focusing on the period from 1974 to 1990, it examines how China was integrated into Bonn’s strategic outlook prior to German unification, and how this strategic rationale gradually receded thereafter, giving way to the predominance of economic considerations. It also shows that West Germany, driven by optimistic expectations about China’s future, consciously downplayed ideological differences and value-based conflicts in bilateral relations. By the late 1980s, a symbiotic relationship had already formed between German firms and the Chinese market, rooted in long-term optimism and pragmatic engagement.

Introduction

When Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang visited West Germany in June 1985, as the first Chinese head of government to do so since Hua Guofeng’s trip in 1979, the conservative, economically liberal newspaper *Die Welt*, part of the Axel Springer publishing group, seized the occasion to issue a special China supplement exceeding twenty pages in length. This initiative was consistent with Axel Springer’s self-positioning as a prominent anti-communist publisher who framed the defence of West Berlin and the pursuit of German unity as a political mission. As Springer had already emphasised in the 1970s, when advocating for the establishment of a Chinese consulate in West Berlin, *Die Welt* had ‘recognised at an early stage the development initiated by China’s leading figures for their country’.¹ The first page juxtaposed portrait images of Zhao and Chancellor Helmut Kohl beneath the headline ‘Intensifying Cooperation. Relations Raised to a New Level’, followed by bilingual statements attributed separately to each leader.² The supplement surveyed a broad range of political, economic, cultural and historical topics and also included practical information for prospective travellers. German corporations with business interests in China were prominently represented throughout. One article even reported that the Chamber of Commerce in Koblenz was providing technical training for employees of the Chinese defence-industrial conglomerate Norinco, while simultaneously downplaying its military character by emphasising its civilian production and role as a foreign trade

¹ Axel Springer to Chinese Ambassador Zhang Tong, 17 Jan. 1979, Axel Springer SE Corporate Archives, Axel Springer Collection, Box 368.

² ‘Die Zusammenarbeit intensivieren. Beziehung auf neue Ebene gehoben’, *Die Welt*, 130, 7 June 1985, I, Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BArch), B 136/30579.

corporation.³ Such portrayals reflected the broadly optimistic and affirmative perceptions of China that prevailed in West Germany during the 1980s.

It was only after the Cold War that divergent expectations within the bilateral relationship became increasingly evident. While German actors had approached cooperation with commercial pragmatism, Chinese advances, such as the development of a main battle tank incorporating German-supplied components, revealed a more strategic agenda that had been underestimated, even though Beijing had been openly articulating a path to modernisation that was distinct from Western models. From federal ministries to state governments, multinational corporations to small and medium-sized enterprises and their trade associations, there was a widespread reluctance to jeopardise access to what was now widely seen as one of the most promising global growth markets. Alongside scholarship that emphasises domestic policy autonomy in China's reform process, Frank Bösch's argument is particularly pertinent here: China's economic rise was not an automatic consequence of globalisation but rather the outcome of deliberate and sustained Western engagement, especially by West Germany, which was pursued despite ongoing normative divisions.⁴

This article argues that while economic interests played an important role in shaping West Germany's China policy, they were consistently underpinned by broader political and strategic considerations, particularly within the context of Cold War security dynamics. This article does not deny the significance of economic motives; however, even at their peak in 1985, the year with the highest level of exports to China, such exports accounted for only around 1 per cent of West Germany's total export volume.⁵ At first glance, this figure underscores the limited short-term economic relevance of the Chinese market. The rationale for engagement with China was primarily future-oriented and long-term in nature. In most cases, political strategy and economic interest operated in tandem, mutually reinforcing one another and facilitating the deepening of economic ties with China. After German unification and the end of the Cold War, this strategic political dimension largely receded. In its place emerged a predominantly economy-driven approach to China, shaped by the symbiotic economic relationships West German firms had developed with the Chinese market during the 1980s and strengthened by the triumphalism that followed the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe.⁶

China policy cannot be simplistically reduced to Cold War logic. However, due to China's peripheral relevance to West Germany's core security interests, policymakers continued to frame their approach to China within the broader context of *Ostpolitik*. From the end of the 1960s, the strategic calculus within the Western bloc experienced a reconfiguration, primarily due to the deepening Sino–Soviet split. The Nixon government marked a turning point in Western policy towards China. Scholars of Sino–American relations broadly agree that the primary catalyst for the rapprochement in the 1970s and 1980s was the perceived Soviet threat.⁷ Following Washington's initiative, Beijing gradually gained diplomatic recognition from other Western nations, with France standing as the exception, having established formal ties in 1964. In the case of West Germany, early studies from

³Torsten Krauel, 'Koblenz' Mittelstand schult für den Mischkonzern Norinco, *ibid.*, VI.

⁴Sebastian Heilmann, 'Policy Experimentation in China's Economic Rise', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43 (Dec. 2007): 1–26; Sebastian Heilmann, 'From Local Experiments to National Policy: The Origins of China's Distinctive Policy Process', *The China Journal* 59 (Jan. 2008): 1–30; Frank Bösch, *Deals mit Diktaturen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2024), 462.

⁵In 1985, West German exports to China reached a peak of 6.43 billion Deutsche Marks, yet still accounted for only about 1.2 per cent of total exports. China nevertheless absorbed 23 per cent of West Germany's exports to Eastern markets, even though trade with Eastern countries as a whole represented just 5.2 per cent of overall export volume; see BDI Annual Report 1984/1986, 210–11.

⁶Focusing on the post-1989 period, Wentker contends that while human rights issues increasingly entered the bilateral discourse, economic imperatives remained the dominant force shaping the West German and, later, unified German approach to China; see Hermann Wentker, 'Eine schwierige Partnerschaft. Die deutsche Chinapolitik zwischen menschenrechtlichem Anspruch und ökonomischen Interessen 1989 bis 1996', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 73, no. 1 (2025): 1–41.

⁷Hugo Meijer, *Trading with the Enemy: The Making of US Export Control Policy toward the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 56; S. Mahmud Ali, *US–China Cold War, Collaboration, 1971–1989* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

the 1990s focusing on the 1970s predominantly examined China's strategic relevance within the context of the Sino–Soviet split and the resulting Sino–US–Soviet triangle.⁸ Domestic political debates, particularly concerning the US use of the 'Chinese card' against the Soviet Union, became a central analytical framework.⁹ Economic factors, however, remained largely peripheral to the academic discourse of the time. More recent comparative research has expanded this focus. In addition to Frank Bösch, Martin Albers, for instance, extended the temporal scope to 1982 and argued that among mid-sized European powers, West Germany's pragmatic approach, centred on cultivating economic ties, proved the most effective approach to engaging China.¹⁰

While existing studies on West Germany's China policy offer valuable insights, they often treat political and economic dimensions in isolation, rarely addressing the complex interplay between the two systems. Building upon previous research, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse by posing a central question: when and why did economic cooperation become the cornerstone of West Germany's policy towards China? The opening of German and Chinese archival materials in recent years has made a more comprehensive examination of West German China policy possible for the first time. This study aims to fill this gap by reassessing the economic and political rationales that shaped West Germany's engagement with China during the 1970s and 1980s. It argues that the perceived asymmetry in earlier analyses has obscured the extent to which economic engagement served as not only a means of securing trade benefits but also a deliberate strategy for navigating the geopolitical realities of a divided world.

West Germany began to develop a China policy in the mid-1970s, but until German unification it remained firmly embedded in the strategic framework of *Neue Ostpolitik*, which both enabled and constrained how China could be conceptualised as a political object. *Neue Ostpolitik* was devised primarily for managing relations with Eastern Europe and the Soviet sphere; China was not among its original targets. Its intellectual foundations rested on the premise that German unification could not be achieved through denying the existence of East Germany, nor without taking the Soviet Union into account; thus, policy thinking was structured around the notion of change through rapprochement (*Wandel durch Annäherung*).¹¹ This concept articulated a multidimensional vision of cooperation across political, economic, cultural, scientific and technological domains, thereby differing fundamentally from the later formula 'change through trade' (*Wandel durch Handel*), which is often criticised as ahistorical and as an apologetic shorthand for economic determinism. In the 1980s, *Wandel durch Handel* was neither a dominant public slogan nor a conceptually loaded doctrine. A review of mainstream West German press discourse like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* suggests that the phrase was rarely used and did not structure argumentation as an autonomous policy concept.¹² Trade was present, but largely as a subordinate component

⁸The relations between China, the United States and the Soviet Union are interpreted as a 'great triangle'. The central role of China in this framework is a recurring theme in the research: Dieter Heinzig, *Die Volksrepublik China zwischen den Supermächten 1949–1985: zur Genese eines strategischen Dreiecks* (Cologne: Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, 1985); Jürgen Osterhammel, *China und die Weltgesellschaft* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1989), 379; Robert Ross, ed., *China, the United States, and the Soviet Union: Tripolarity and Policy Making in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Xuewu Gu, *Ausspielung der Barbaren. China zwischen den Supermächten in der Zeit des Ost-West-Konfliktes* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998), among others.

⁹Tim Trampedach, *Bonn und Peking: Die wechselseitige Einbindung in außenpolitische Strategien 1949–1990* (Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde, 1997).

¹⁰Martin Albers, *Britain, France, West Germany and the People's Republic of China, 1969–1982: The European Dimension of China's Great Transition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 169, 216–17.

¹¹Egon Bahr, *Zu meiner Zeit* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 1996), 152–60.

¹²The phrase *Wandel durch Handel* did exist from 1969 to 1990, but it was used only sporadically. It was coined as early as 1969 by Federal Minister of Economics Karl Schiller in the context of the social-liberal *Neue Ostpolitik* under Willy Brandt. Schiller first used the expression at the Berlin Industrial Fair to draw attention to the absence of exhibitors from Eastern Europe and returned to it one year later in the context of the normalisation of relations with Poland. The concept also appeared in practice-oriented diplomatic and commercial contexts, for example when Graf Finck von Finckenstein, deputy head of the West German trade mission in Prague, invoked it during negotiations with the Czechoslovak foreign trade minister Andrej

of rapprochement rather than as its defining mechanism. This does not imply that material prosperity and economic interdependence were marginal within *Ostpolitik*. As William Glen Gray has pointed out, *Neue Ostpolitik* was an outgrowth of German prosperity and of Eastern European expectations of material benefits from West Germany.¹³ Egon Bahr himself never denied the importance of the stabilising promise of wealth as a central assumption of the rapprochement paradigm.¹⁴ As later summarised by Hanns-Dieter Jacobsen, incorporating Eastern European states into a network of international relations designed to create mutual responsibilities was expected to reduce aggression potential, strengthen moderate forces in these countries and facilitate reforms in the economy and society.¹⁵ Yet the applicability of this logic to China was not self-evident during the Cold War. The discursive transfer of *Wandel durch Handel* to China gained broader resonance only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when early 1990s optimism provided a new global horizon in which commercial integration could be imagined as a pathway to systemic transformation. The article's main claim is not that West Germany developed a coherent long-term China strategy comparable to its *Ostpolitik*, but rather that China policy remained strategically subordinate. It was repeatedly recalibrated within the shifting geopolitical landscape of the late Cold War and primarily served as an auxiliary instrument through which the overarching aims of *Ostpolitik* were pursued. The idea of 'domesticating' China thus functioned as a means to encourage China's integration into a cooperative international order compatible with West Germany's security interests.

This article begins by examining China policy under Helmut Schmidt's government and the first two terms of Kohl's administration, identifying key moments where economic and political interests intersected. The second and third sections delve into the ideological and normative tensions that characterised the bilateral relationship. These tensions were often downplayed or overlooked due to the generally positive and pragmatic stance towards China within West German political and economic circles. Given space limitations, the role of business actors and economic associations, as pivotal agents in shaping the bilateral relationship, will be integrated into each section, rather than being treated separately.

'Domesticating' China, Influencing China

The concept of 'domesticating' (*domestizieren*) China emerged as a central theme in Bonn's first internal memorandum on the possibility of a China policy in 1974. Unlike the aggressive and imperial rhetoric of Kaiser Wilhelm II's infamous *Hunnenrede*, the notion of 'domesticating' China here carried a more constructive vision. It reflected a strategic aspiration to integrate China, an emerging power, demographic giant and pivotal actor in Asia, into a broader, Western-oriented framework of international order, in a manner that aligned with West Germany's own geopolitical interests.¹⁶

This strategy became more concretely defined over time. The 1975 memorandum by the Foreign Ministry essentially reiterated the principles established the previous year. By 1976, a joint working

Barčák. See Karl Schiller, 'Konjunkturdämpfung nicht zu Lasten der Arbeiter', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), 20 Sept. 1969, 1; Dettmar Cramer, 'Deutsch-polnische Möglichkeiten. Überlegungen vor dem vierten Gespräch Dückwitz-Winiewicz', FAZ, 21 May 1970, 2; 'Kein Rückschlag im Handel mit Prag', FAZ, 11 Sept. 1972, 17. In academic debate, Angela Stent analysed West German responses to US demands for export embargoes (1962 and 1982) and argued that Bonn pursued a strategy of *Wandel und Handel*; see Helga Haftendorn, 'Osthandel und die Neuorientierung der Ostpolitik', FAZ, 7 July 1986, 6.

¹³William Glenn Gray, *Trading Power: West Germany's Rise to Global Influence, 1963–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 464.

¹⁴Bahr, *Zeit*, 156–7.

¹⁵Hans-Dieter Jacobsen, 'European Perspectives', in Gary K. Bertsch and Steven Elliott Gower, eds., *Export Controls in Transition: Perspectives, Problems, and Prospects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 73.

¹⁶The idea was not to subjugate, but to integrate: 'bei Vorliegen aller anderen Voraussetzungen, mögen wir auf eine gewichtige Unterstützung unserer eigenen Anliegen durch China hoffen können'. Lothar Lahn to Hans-Dietrich Genscher regarding the possibilities of a German China policy, 12 Sept. 1974, 7, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PA AA), B 37/100095.

group from the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Defence, convened to assess security policy in the aftermath of the CSCE, outlined more precise steps. These included the sustained development of diplomatic dialogue with Beijing, the deepening of political and economic ties and the careful monitoring – and, where possible, the influencing – of China's evolving foreign and security policy.¹⁷

Why, then, did discussions on China policy only commence in 1974, rather than in 1972 when diplomatic relations were formally established? This question leads us to the central argument of this article: that the Soviet Union played a crucial and evolving role in shaping West Germany's China policy. The nature and extent of this influence shifted significantly as the international context evolved. The establishment of diplomatic relations should be understood less as a proactive strategic decision and more as a reactive political manoeuvre. At that time, *Neue Ostpolitik* was still in the process of consolidation, and every West German move towards Beijing was closely scrutinised by Moscow. Bonn therefore kept Moscow continuously informed about its contacts and intentions regarding China, in order to avoid the appearance of a strategic realignment.¹⁸ West Germany was among the last Western European countries to establish relations with Beijing, merely following a pattern already set by its peers.¹⁹ Furthermore, China's accession to the United Nations Security Council in 1971 combined with negotiations for the UN membership of both German states, in which Beijing held a veto, rendered diplomatic engagement with China a practical necessity. Chancellor Willy Brandt was therefore able to present the decision to Leonid Brezhnev as a technical and pragmatic rather than anti-Soviet adjustment.²⁰

From the outset, Bonn's guiding principle was unambiguous: *Neue Ostpolitik* would always take clear precedence over any initiatives in the Far East. Bonn was acutely aware that any perceived tilt against Moscow would risk undermining the fragile détente it was cultivating through its *Ostpolitik*. As such, any attempt to play Beijing off against Moscow was categorically ruled out.²¹ This strategic restraint was reflected in the careful management of all high-level engagements with China. For instance, when Minister for Education and Science Klaus von Dohnanyi was invited to visit China in 1973, the Chancellor's Office insisted on postponing the trip.²² Only after the Bundestag ratified the Basic Treaty between West Germany and East Germany on 11 May 1973, and following Brezhnev's visit to Bonn later that month, during which an agreement on economic cooperation was concluded, was a date for Dohnanyi's visit finally confirmed.²³ None of this, however, should be taken as evidence that concerns about the Soviet Union had dissipated. Well into the mid-1980s, while Soviet sensitivities were increasingly receding in matters of economic cooperation with China, they continued to exert a significant influence on the political and military dimensions of West German foreign policy.

The implementation of any influence-oriented strategy towards China in the 1970s remained highly constrained. Although the two sides had no direct conflicts of interest, their assessments of the global political situation, particularly regarding the Soviet Union, differed entirely. Both attempted to persuade the other, yet neither was willing to yield ground. The 1975 conversation between

¹⁷Original text: 'das Gespräch mit Peking kontinuierlich zu entwickeln, die Beziehungen, insbesondere im wirtschaftlichen und politischen Bereich zu vertiefen und die Entwicklung der chinesischen Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik sorgfältig zu beobachten und womöglich zu beeinflussen.' Record of the working group of the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of Defense, 10 Feb. 1976, *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (AAPD)* 1976, Doc. No. 45, 207.

¹⁸Bernd Schaefer, 'Ostpolitik, "Fernostpolitik", and Sino-Soviet Rivalry: China and the Two Germanys', in *Ostpolitik, 1969–1974: European and Global Responses*, ed. Carole Fink and Bernd Schaefer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 137–9.

¹⁹Record of Ministerial Director van Well, 13 Jan. 1972, *AAPD* 1972, Doc. No. 6, 6.

²⁰Talk between Federal Chancellor Brandt and President Nixon in Key Biscayne, 29 Dec. 1971, *AAPD* 1971, Doc. No. 452, 2011–2.

²¹Ernst Majonica, 'Bonn zwischen Moskau und Peking', *Die Politische Meinung*, Jahrgang 1968, Heft II, 90.

²²VLR I Dr Massion, Department 344, to the Federal Chancellor, 5 Apr. 1973, BArch, B 136/6306.

²³Dohnanyi ultimately travelled to China in late October and early November of that year. Klaus von Dohnanyi, Federal Minister for Education and Science, wrote to the Chargé d'Affaires of China, Wang Shu, 11 May 1973, BArch, B 138/44779.

Mao Zedong and Helmut Schmidt, while couched in abstract discussions of German philosophers, was marked by pronounced political disagreement.²⁴ In the years preceding China's reform and opening-up, détente with the Soviet Union was a frequent target of Chinese criticism, often drawing comparisons to the appeasement policy towards Hitler after 1938.²⁵ During Mao's final years and the prolonged aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, external influence on Chinese policy-making was virtually impossible.

Only after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 did Bonn perceive a favourable opportunity to exert political influence. A new leadership cohort was consolidating power, and Beijing faced critical decisions in both domestic and foreign policy. Given that the newly appointed foreign minister, Huang Hua, had no prior experience with Western Europe or West Germany, Bonn considered it essential to engage with the Chinese leadership directly to help shape China's future orientation.²⁶

Despite a clear imbalance in high-level bilateral visits, which were overwhelmingly in China's favour, and several unanswered invitations to the Chinese foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher nevertheless chose to undertake a second official visit to China.²⁷ Although this visit offered little indication of any change within China's political leadership, it served to reaffirm West Germany's interest in sustained cooperation and its commitment to engagement. This impression was further strengthened by the composition of Genscher's delegation: the seventeen representatives from the business and academic sectors outnumbered the fifteen political delegates, highlighting the multifaceted nature of Bonn's interest in the relationship.²⁸

While deeply divergent worldviews between Bonn and Beijing limited the possibilities for political dialogue, economic and scientific cooperation emerged as the primary channels through which West Germany could exert meaningful influence. These areas aligned with China's own priorities, as it actively sought engagement with industrialised countries. During the transitional period following the deaths of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, the groundwork for China's reform and opening-up policy was laid. While domestic political dynamics were undoubtedly central to this transformation, the constructive and forward-looking engagement of external actors, including West Germany, played a crucial enabling role, particularly through initiatives in economics and scientific exchange. This interpretation resonates with the work of scholars such as Odd Arne Westad and Jian Chen, who stress the significance of external partnerships, especially with the United States and Japan, in shaping China's economic rise.²⁹ This article extends that perspective by showing how West Germany constituted an additional case of such external participation.

International cooperation was not merely supportive but also integral to the conditions under which reform policies could be envisioned and implemented. In the period leading up to the formal adoption of reform policy at the Third Plenary Session of the eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, investigative delegations dispatched by the Chinese leadership to Western Europe

²⁴ Conversation between Federal Chancellor Schmidt and the Chairman of the Central Committee and the Politburo of the Communist Party of China, Mao Tse-tung, in Beijing, 30 Oct. 1975, AAPD 1975, Doc. No. 323, 1497–1500.

²⁵ Telegraphic dispatch from Erwin Wickert to the Foreign Office regarding the second round of talks with Huang Hua, 15 Oct. 1977, PA AA, B 37/103178; "Economic Cooperation" or Feeding a Tiger to Invite Disaster? Growing Opposition in the West to Economic Appeasement towards the Soviet Union, *People's Daily*, 3 July 1977.

²⁶ Department 3, Foreign Office, 15 Mar. 1977, 3–4, PA AA, B 37/103178.

²⁷ A number of senior West German officials – among them Foreign Minister Walter Scheel, Education Minister Klaus von Dohnanyi, Interior Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Economics Minister Hans Friedrichs, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Research Minister Hans Matthöfer – undertook visits to China. However, these high-level engagements were never reciprocated by Chinese counterparts. According to Genscher's memoir, he was invited to China in 1972 as minister of the interior because of his responsibility for sport. His host was the Chinese minister of sport, and his main interlocutor was Zhou Enlai; see Hans-Dietrich Genscher, *Meine Sicht der Dinge. Im Gespräch mit Hans-Dieter Heumann* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2015), 49–50.

²⁸ Gesamtdelegation, PA AA, B 37/103,178; Interview with Hans Otto Thierbach (Deutsche Bank), Stiftung Rheinisch-Westfälisches Wirtschaftsarchiv zu Köln (RWVA), 72-1218-1.

²⁹ Odd Arne Westad and Jian Chen, *The Great Transformation: China's Road from Revolution to Reform* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024), 216–30.

played a critical role. Their reports indicate that they perceived strong signals of external support, especially from West Germany, as an encouraging factor in contemplating economic transformation. Among these missions, the delegation led by Vice Premier Gu Mu proved particularly influential. Yang Bo, a member of the delegation, recalled: 'In West Germany, so many activities had been arranged that we could no longer travel by car and had to take a helicopter instead.'³⁰ The delegation's observations of the considerable economic gap between China and West Germany, alongside the enthusiastic reception they received from state governments, corporations and banks, as well as pledges of economic support, culminated in a seven-hour high-level meeting.³¹ This meeting helped shape the broader context in which the decisive policy turn of December 1978 became politically viable.

Equally significant were the West German industrial delegations that had visited China throughout the 1970s. Among the most representative were the 1973 delegation led by 'Steel Baron' Berthold Beitz and the 1976 mission of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), led by Hans-Günther Sohl. Functioning in a quasi-diplomatic capacity, these groups not only conveyed clear signals of willingness for economic cooperation but also accommodated China's preference for wide-ranging political dialogue.³² Such gestures contributed to Beijing's perception of a supportive Western posture, an impression that helped legitimise and facilitate its strategic turn towards reform. Beyond the industrial sphere, natural science research institutions such as the Max Planck Society and DESY likewise responded positively to Chinese initiatives to establish channels of scientific and technological collaboration.³³

Following the Chinese decision to reform, West German businesses initially responded with considerable enthusiasm. Yet the early euphoria soon gave way to disappointment as economic restructuring in China led to the cancellation of contracts.³⁴ This sobering experience prompted a shift towards a more measured and pragmatic approach. German firms came to recognise that success in China depended on not merely market access but also the stability and predictability of the evolving Chinese economic system. Consequently, they began to engage with Beijing's reforms in a more cooperative and adaptive manner.

China's domestic economic reforms were accompanied by a shift in its foreign policy, marked by renewed pragmatism. This included the reopening of border negotiations with the Soviet Union. Although Beijing consistently emphasised its political independence and avoided formal alignment with any bloc, officials in Bonn remained apprehensive about the possibility of a gradual

³⁰Yang Bo discusses his trip to the West in 1978: Gu Mu led the delegation to investigate Western Europe; *Diyi Caijing Ribao*, 6 Nov. 2009, accessed 2 Apr. 2025, <http://www.reformdata.org/2009/1106/3337.shtml>.

³¹Vice Premier Gu Mu reported on the findings of the investigation for seven hours, in *Liaowang Dongfang Weekly*, 18 Nov. 2008, accessed 2 Apr. 2025, <http://www.reformdata.org/2008/1118/3321.shtml>; see also Gu Mu, *Memories of Gu Mu* (Gu Mu Huiyilu) (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2009), 305–7.

³²In discussions with business representatives, China continued to criticise the détente policy as appeasement, warning that concessions to the Soviet Union and economic support could strengthen its geopolitical power. Hans-Günther Sohl, for example, sought to downplay West Germany's economic ties with the Soviet Union by presenting specific facts to show that the support for the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist states was limited; see Record of the Meeting with Qiao Guanhua in Beijing on 20 May 1976, Bayer AG, Bayer Archives Leverkusen, 302–1010.

³³Due to space limitations, this article does not examine scientific cooperation in greater detail. For a case study, see Carola Sachse: *Wissenschaft und Diplomatie: die Max-Planck-Gesellschaft im Feld der internationalen Politik (1945–2000)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023), 300–7.

³⁴In the early 1980s, structural adjustments in China's domestic economy led to the cancellation of numerous previously signed contracts; see Balance of trade with China, BDI Informationen + Meinungen 9/81, RWVA, 175–32–2; German and Japanese firms were among the most affected. One notable example was the termination of the Schloemann-Siemag contract for the construction of a cold rolling mill; see Telegram from Beijing to 341, 30 Jan. 1981, BAArch, B 102/285565. Nevertheless, German firms navigated this period with relative success. Schloemann-Siemag, for instance, adopted a pragmatic and understanding approach, agreeing to delay delivery. The execution of the turnkey contract for Baoshan's cold rolling mill was postponed accordingly; see *People's Daily*, 6 Mar. 1982, 3.

rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow.³⁵ These concerns informed the broader strategic setting of Foreign Minister Genscher's return visit to China in 1981. At a time when Sino-American relations had stagnated due to the Reagan administration's ambiguous and hesitant China policy regarding Taiwan, Genscher sought to provide a measure of balance by reinforcing West Germany's independent line towards Beijing and mitigating the growing uncertainty in the triangular relationship between China, the United States and the Soviet Union.³⁶

Only by 1984 did Bonn begin to reap tangible strategic dividends from its long-standing policy of cautious engagement and, in effect, 'domesticating' China. Such a development would have seemed implausible in the 1970s, yet it reflected a strategic opportunity that West German policymakers had anticipated for decades. As early as the 1950s, Konrad Adenauer had speculated that the Soviet Union might one day perceive a rising China not as a partner, but as a geopolitical and ideological rival in Asia.³⁷ For West Germany, the gradual intensification of Sino-Soviet tensions represented a latent strategic asset. As Adenauer himself remarked, 'one had to let things mature; one must not lose patience nor courage.'³⁸

By the mid-1980s, Bonn had developed a soft 'Chinese card' strategy, not as an explicit attempt to play Beijing against Moscow but rather as a form of indirect strategic signalling through the expansion of economic ties with China. At this time, Moscow faced mounting challenges including the escalating arms race, economic stagnation and leadership transition, conditions that created a moment of potential openness to external influence, not unlike China's post-Mao turning point in 1977. Intensifying competition between Moscow and Beijing within the socialist bloc provided Bonn with a strategic lever. West German officials believed that China's accelerating economic reforms would heighten the Soviet Union's sense of encirclement, eventually compelling it to pursue accommodation with the West.

This strategic reading found expression in both Bonn's diplomatic analyses and the Foreign Ministry's close monitoring of Soviet media discourse on Chinese reforms.³⁹ By 1985, internal assessments had identified three critical pressure points confronting Soviet leadership: the escalating arms competition in space, the Moscow's growing technological lag and China's emergence as a credible systemic challenger. For West German observers, Soviet leaders faced what one internal memo described as an 'almost nightmarish' constellation of threats.⁴⁰

A central objective of West German China policy thus became to subtly encourage Soviet introspection: to impress upon Moscow that rapprochement with the West might offer a means of coping with the long-term strategic challenge posed by China. Paul Nitze, President Reagan's special adviser,

³⁵The record of the conversation between Genscher and Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua, 15 Oct. 1982, 9–10. There were articles in the Soviet Union suggesting that China might return to the Soviet camp; see the telegram from Moscow to the Foreign Office, 7 June 1982, PA AA, B 37/125304.

³⁶Department 3, Federal Minister's visit to China, 9 Mar. 1981, PA AA, B 37/125302.

³⁷Grundy refers to the widely held assumption that Adenauer's thinking was significantly influenced by Wilhelm Starlinger's work *Grenzen der Sowjetmacht* (Limits of Soviet Power). Starlinger argued that the Sino-Soviet alliance contained the seeds of its own destruction: China's unstoppable population growth would ultimately force Beijing to abandon ideological solidarity, withdraw from the alliance and turn towards Siberia in search of 'living space'. The Kremlin, in turn, would be compelled to secure its European flank and focus on the more dangerous threat in the East. See Steven Crawford Grundy, 'The Sino-Soviet alliance in Konrad Adenauer's Chancellorship, 1945–1963', *Diplomatic History* 47, no. 1 (2023): 143–4. Horst Osterheld notes that this interpretation applies, at most, to the brief period between the publication of Starlinger's book and Adenauer's meeting with Khrushchev in September 1955. After that encounter, Adenauer is said to have relied solely on his own impressions; see Horst Osterheld, *Ich gehe nicht leichten Herzens . . . Adenauers letzte Kanzlerjahre. Ein dokumentarischer Bericht* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1986), 285, fn. 72.

³⁸Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen, 1953–1955* (Stuttgart: dva, 1966), 65–6.

³⁹Telegraphic dispatches from Moscow to the Foreign Office on 20 July 1984, 25 Oct. 1984, 28 Feb. 1985, 21 Apr. 1984 and 21 May 1986, PA AA, B 37/140451.

⁴⁰Ministerialdirigent Edler von Braunmühl, in Helsinki, to the Foreign Ministry, 6 Mar. 1985, AAPD 1985, Doc. No. 55, 302.

reinforced this view in a conversation with Genscher, arguing that it was in the Soviet Union's rational interest to seek new strategic arrangements with the West, given China's economic trajectory. Genscher went even further, warning that China's economic success could redefine the global communist hierarchy: 'the seat of the pope of the communist world church' could shift from Moscow to Beijing.⁴¹ In this light, peaceful modernisation, long deferred in Soviet planning, could no longer be postponed. This line of reasoning was subsequently translated into diplomatic practice towards Eastern Europe. In a 1985 conversation in Bonn with Mátyás Szűrös, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party Central Committee secretary for foreign affairs, Genscher linked references to China's growing economic strength with appeals to support reform dynamics within the socialist camp, thereby encouraging Eastern European states both to pursue reforms and to accept Western technological cooperation.⁴²

Whereas the Soviet Union had long constrained West Germany's China policy, by the mid-1980s, economic cooperation with China had itself become a channel through which Bonn sought to facilitate Moscow's rapprochement with the West. This development reflected an early form of what would later be termed *Wandel durch Handel*. Within this framework, trade with China functioned less as a means to change China itself and more as a strategic instrument to encourage transformation within the Soviet Union. 'Domesticating China' was thus subordinated to the broader *Ostpolitik* agenda and assumed a primarily long-term rather than immediate strategic significance. As dialogue between Moscow and the West progressed following Gorbachev's assumption of office, China's strategic importance gradually declined. Although economic engagement continued, the short-term instability stemming from China's experimental economic reforms began to impede trade. At the same time, industrial cooperation deepened, and the relationship shifted from being shaped by broader 'triangle dynamics' to one that increasingly focused on the bilateral ties themselves.

Problems in the So-Called Problem-Free Relationship: Ideological and Systemic Rivalry

As economic and scientific cooperation with China deepened, Bonn increasingly portrayed bilateral relations as 'problem-free'. This optimistic framing tended to obscure deeper structural tensions, most evident in two areas: enduring ideological and systemic rivalry, particularly manifest in cultural exchanges and competing interpretations of Germany policy; and the growing salience of human rights as a point of contention.

China's role as an ideological and systemic rival was largely obscured by its instrumentalisation within West Germany's *Neue Ostpolitik*. As a socialist country pursuing reform and opening through cooperation with the West, China was seen by the United States as a de facto ally against the Soviet Union, and by West Germany as an instrument indirectly to pressure Moscow by supporting China's economic reform. Nevertheless, the systemic rivalry remained a tangible reality beneath this pragmatic engagement. The following sections will explore how this rivalry surfaced in the realms of cultural exchange and Germany policy.

In contrast to Franco-German reconciliation, cultural policy played little role in fostering broader mutual understanding with China, as cultural exchange remained a highly sensitive domain. Until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Western culture in China was largely excluded, and campaigns even targeted canonical figures such as Beethoven and Schubert.⁴³ After 1976, symbolic forms of cultural exchange, including music and ballet, became more acceptable, but ideologically charged cultural engagement remained restricted. The establishment of the Goethe-Institut in Beijing offers a revealing case.

⁴¹ Ambassador Rückriegel, Bangkok, to the Foreign Office, 21 Apr. 1984, 3, PA AA, B 37/140451.

⁴² Memorandum, 25 Nov. 1985, PA AA, NL 75/220.

⁴³ Cultural Relations between the FRG and the PRC, 24 Sept. 1979, 1, BArch, B 136/17125; Meeting documents: Visit of Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Chiao Kuan-hua to Bonn, 1974, China, 2, BArch, B 136/17119.

By the early 1970s, Beijing had also become a site of symbolic competition between two Germanys over claims to represent German cultural sovereignty.⁴⁴ Although the Goethe-Institut had already dispatched German-language teachers to China since 1976, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made clear that Beijing was opposed to the establishment of foreign cultural institutes on its territory.⁴⁵ In the early 1980s, deepening economic and technological ties with China and improving Sino–East German relations, especially through renewed engagement with officials in Chinese government and research institutions who had studied in Leipzig or East Berlin during the 1950s and 1960s, led West German policymakers to identify both an opportunity and a strategic necessity to revisit this issue.⁴⁶ During his 1984 visit to China, Helmut Kohl obtained Deng Xiaoping's swift approval for the establishment of a Goethe-Institut, although according to the institute's first director, Michael Kahn-Ackermann, Deng was likely unaware of what such an institute entailed.⁴⁷ Negotiations proved difficult, not least because the German side struggled to find a responsible interlocutor and Chinese ministries repeatedly deflected responsibility, leaving no clear partner for dialogue.⁴⁸ As vice premier and head of the State Education Commission, Li Peng, made clear in talks with the German embassy: 'We do not want to see all German values imported.'⁴⁹ Only after the issue of a negotiating counterpart was resolved did formal talks begin in 1986. However, negotiations soon stagnated again in 1987 amidst tightening ideological control following student unrest. The German side ultimately had to abandon the idea of establishing an independent institute and accept Beijing's model of a joint institute under state supervision, with all programming subject to approval by the Chinese Education Commission. In the end, the Goethe-Institut was placed firmly under Chinese control.⁵⁰

This also reflected the broader ambivalence that marked China's reform trajectory. As economic cooperation with the West deepened, the government faced mounting domestic pressure. Many young people began to view the widening gap between China and the developed West as a failure of the socialist system, prompting renewed efforts to tighten ideological control in order to safeguard regime legitimacy.⁵¹ West Germany, however, maintained an optimistic outlook on China's development, focusing primarily on economic structural issues rather than political or ideological concerns. This optimism intensified after Gorbachev came to power and initiated a reform agenda in the Soviet Union.

The ideological gap also extended beyond cultural exchange into Beijing's ambivalent Germany policy. Since Zhou Enlai's expression of support for German unification during Walter Scheel's 1972 visit, Chinese leaders consistently offered favourable statements on the German question. These pronouncements, however, framed unification primarily in terms of the unity of 'German people' and situated it within a sovereignty discourse that emphasised German unification as a matter solely for the German people, beyond the legitimate scope of third-party intervention.⁵² Yet, given that East

⁴⁴Sebastian Gehrig, 'Informal Cold War Envoys. West German and East German Cultural Diplomacy in East Asia', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 24, no. 4 (2022): 143–8.

⁴⁵Telegram from Ambassador Erwin Wickert to the Federal Foreign Office, 20 Sept. 1978, BArch, B 136/17121.

⁴⁶Annual Report on Cultural Policy 1985, China, 22–3, PA AA, BAV226-SHAN/17230.

⁴⁷Michael Kahn-Ackermann, 'Über die Schwierigkeit, einzigartig zu sein. Der Sonderfall China', Deutsches Historisches Museum, accessed 24 Apr. 2025, <https://www.dhm.de/archiv/ausstellungen/goethe/katalog/ackermann.htm>.

⁴⁸Goethe-Institut was a 'cuckoo's egg (Kuckucksei)', as termed by Kahn-Ackermann, 'Über die Schwierigkeit'.

⁴⁹Telegraphic dispatch from Beijing to the Foreign Office on 2 Nov. 1985, Final assessment, 3, PA AA, B 37/142564. Although the Goethe-Institutes in other socialist states, such as Romania and Yugoslavia, had to register events, they were not subject to the same extensive control as in Beijing; see Bösch, *Deals with Diktaturen*, 427.

⁵⁰Proposed agenda for the discussion, 10 June 1986, BArch, B 136/30232.

⁵¹Concept for the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian to the FRG from 20 to 25 Mar. 1987, 12 Feb. 1987, PA AA, B 37/143556; Department 3 to the State Secretary and Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, 12 Feb. 1987, PA AA, B 37/142564; see also Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 576–8.

⁵²Sebastian Gehrig, *Legal Entanglements: Law, Rights and the Battle for Legitimacy in Divided Germany, 1945–1989* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), 13.

Germany had, through its 1967 citizenship law and the 1968 constitution and especially the 1974 constitutional revision, legally and symbolically abandoned the claim to represent the German nation as a whole and instead defined itself as a sovereign socialist state, Chinese expressions in favour of unity could de facto be read as aligning with the West German position.⁵³ These statements were carefully recorded by the West German Foreign Ministry and often interpreted as signs of goodwill towards Bonn, while simultaneously prompting recurrent protests from East German authorities.⁵⁴

The seemingly peaceful consensus increasingly revealed underlying contradictions as Beijing's relations with East Germany began to improve in the early 1980s. Scholars typically interpret this shift within the strategic triangle of China, the United States and the Soviet Union. The Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands; SED) sought to neutralise China and reintegrate it into the broader anti-imperialist struggle in order to prevent the 'anti-socialist alliance' between the United States, China, Western Europe and Japan that Brezhnev feared.⁵⁵ Joachim Krüger shows that, while formally adhering to the Soviet line, the SED quietly pursued closer ties with Beijing and assumed a leading role within Interkit, the coordination mechanism for Eastern Bloc China policy.⁵⁶ Marcel Bode attributed this to the decline in Soviet support and East Germany's hope that China could provide an economic alternative.⁵⁷ However, Axel Berkofsky argues that with the rise of Deng in the late 1970s and the de-ideologisation of Chinese politics, Beijing's support for the notion of a second German state became irrelevant.⁵⁸ From an international-legal perspective, Sebastian Gehrig has stressed that the German and China questions remained intertwined within a sovereignty discourse of 'divided nations' in the 1980s.⁵⁹ Building on this insight, this article contends that the German question became even more intractable during that decade.

In response to the liberalising pressures and ideological uncertainty, Beijing deemed it increasingly important to preserve the image of stability and cultivate reliable relations with other socialist states, including East Germany. As scholars of Chinese strategy have emphasised, economic development was conceived not as a pathway to political liberalisation but rather as a means of safeguarding the legitimacy of one-party rule.⁶⁰ While continuing to support German unification in the context of close economic and technological cooperation with West Germany, Beijing simultaneously sought to avoid establishing irreversible facts in its relationship with East Germany.⁶¹ This was particularly evident in a series of directives regarding Berlin. Initially, this was only reflected in trade relations with West Berlin. Following instructions from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Trade, West German

⁵³ Ibid., 10–13.

⁵⁴ Examples: Chinese statements on the German question since October 1972, 8 Nov. 1974; Chinese position on the Germany and Berlin issue, 1 Aug. 1975, PA AA, B 37/101536; German–Chinese Relations, 25 Feb. 1981, 2, PA AA, B 37/125302; Department III to State Secretary Mertes, 27 Sept. 1984, 7–8, PA AA, B 37/133574; Appendix. Oral statement delivered to the Ambassador of the PCR (19 May 1978), PA AA, M 42/2335–90.

⁵⁵ Werner Meißner, ed., *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik-Wirtschaft-Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung* (Berlin: Akademie, 1995), 348.

⁵⁶ Joachim Krüger, 'Das letzte Jahrzehnt der Beziehungen der DDR zur Volksrepublik China', in *Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur: Studien zu den deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen*, ed. Mechthild Leutner (Münster: LIT, 1996), 65–7. Axel Berkofsky also holds the view that during the 1980s, the East Germany sought to develop an independent foreign policy and position itself as a mediator between the Soviet Union and China; see Axel Berkofsky, 'China und die DDR in den 1980er Jahren. Feinde, Schönwetterfreunde und Komplizen', *Deutschland Archiv*, 17 Jan. 2020, accessed 20 June 2024, www.bpb.de/303741.

⁵⁷ Marcel Bode, *Die DDR und die Volksrepublik China in den Jahren 1978 bis 1990. Chancen und Grenzen einer ungleichen Partnerschaft, Potsdamer Textbücher, Band 21* (Potsdam: WeltTrends, 2013).

⁵⁸ Axel Berkofsky, 'China und die Berlin- und Deutschlandfrage: Erst Zuckerbrot, dann Peitsche für Ost-Berlin', *Deutschland Archiv*, 27 May 2020, accessed 29 Nov. 2024, www.bpb.de/310578.

⁵⁹ Gehrig, *Legal Entanglements*.

⁶⁰ Barry Buzan, 'The Logic and Contradictions of "Peaceful Rise/Development" as China's Grand Strategy', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 4 (2014): 389–90; Jisi Wang, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy', *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011): 68–79.

⁶¹ Embassy Beijing: German–Chinese Relations, May 1978, BArch, B 136/17120.

and West Berlin firms were to be treated separately in business communications.⁶² A document from the Chinese Import–Export Inspection Bureau in 1982 explicitly instructed provincial and municipal governments to avoid using terms such as ‘Federal Republic of Germany, West Berlin’ or ‘West Germany, West Berlin’ in response letters to firms from West Berlin. Instead, the term ‘Berlin (West)’ was to be used.⁶³

As Chinese delegations increasingly travelled to West Germany, regulations concerning visits to West Berlin were further clarified in 1984. Government delegations and officials at the level of vice minister were generally prohibited from making official visits to West Berlin. Should such a visit be deemed necessary for business purposes, it required approval from the relevant ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, followed by submission to the State Council for final authorisation. Even when permitted, the visit was expected to remain as unofficial and low-profile as possible. In cases where a last-minute invitation from the German side was extended, vice minister–level officials were instructed to politely decline. Additionally, the directive stipulated that West Berlin should not be presented as part of West Germany in any public reporting.⁶⁴ In 1987, these policies regarding West Berlin were revised and further tightened.⁶⁵

Furthermore, a 1985 circular from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted the ambivalence in Beijing’s Germany policy. The concluding section reiterated the familiar rhetoric of friendly relations with both German states. However, it dedicated considerable space to emphasising socialist solidarity, declaring that the ‘socialist development of East Germany had been obstructed by constant disruptions from West Berlin prior to the construction of the Berlin Wall, causing significant political and economic damage.’⁶⁶ The document explicitly forbade any public criticism of the Berlin Wall, stressing that the Wall was not the cause of Germany’s division, but rather its consequence.⁶⁷

Across a range of concrete episodes, Bonn did register the underlying contradictions of Beijing’s Germany policy, contradictions largely masked by intensive economic and technological cooperation. Yet it showed little overt concern. This complacency likely reflected West German confidence in its own economic indispensability to China. As long as reform continued, Beijing’s demand for advanced technology could be met by West Germany rather than by East Germany, an assumption that further reinforced Bonn’s commitment to expanding economic cooperation with China.

The discrepancy became evident primarily through Beijing’s refusal to accept invitations to visit Berlin and the comparatively low status afforded to West Berlin delegations visiting China. During the 750th anniversary celebrations of Berlin, the Beijing municipal government received invitations from both East and West Berlin. While West Berlin was represented only by Huang Chao, a relatively low-profile deputy mayor responsible for agriculture, East Berlin was visited by another deputy mayor, Chen Haosu, the son of the esteemed military commander and former foreign minister Chen Yi.⁶⁸ This disparity indicates that Beijing was extending greater symbolic support to East Germany. Moreover, the Foreign Ministry in Bonn observed, by 1987, that Chinese media, particularly the state-run Xinhua News Agency, increasingly disseminated representations of Berlin that aligned more with

⁶²Forwarding the Foreign Trade Department’s ‘Notice on the Issuance of Export Licenses, Shipment Certificates and Certificates of Origin to Berlin Customers, which must not be confused with West Germany’, 27 Nov. 1979, Shandong Provincial Archives (SDA), A050-02-0589-009.

⁶³People’s Republic of China, Import and Export Commodities Inspection Bureau: Notification on the Compliance with Naming Conventions for the Issuance of Certificates for West Berlin, 13 Aug. 1982, SDA, A050-02-0713-023.

⁶⁴People’s Republic of China: Notification on the Confirmation and Revision of Guidelines Concerning West Berlin, 14 June 1984, SDA, A029-06-0721-029.

⁶⁵People’s Republic of China: Notification on the Confirmation and Revision of Certain Guidelines Regarding West Berlin, 17 Jan. 1987, Shanghai Municipal Archives (SHA), B76-6-1256.

⁶⁶This refers back to China’s stance immediately after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961; see Berkofsky, *China und die Berlin- und Deutschlandfrage*.

⁶⁷Notification on the Ban on Criticism of the ‘Berlin Wall’ in Public Statements, 31 Oct. 1985, SDA, A023-04-0302-161.

⁶⁸Embassy of the FRG in Beijing to Department 210, Foreign Office, 24 Apr. 1987, PA AA, B 37/133628.

the East German narrative.⁶⁹ Reports on the West Berlin celebrations were limited to neutral details, such as the schedule and the attending dignitaries. In contrast, the coverage of the East Berlin celebrations was much more detailed, emphasising sharp criticism of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's speech by the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst* (ADN).⁷⁰ This shift in media representation could also be seen as a response to the internal ideological challenges faced by Beijing.

Bonn's response was still to continue strengthening economic ties, hoping to draw China into a position more favourable to its own interests. Resistance to Beijing's Germany policy only manifested in the early 1980s when the new German ambassador in Beijing, Günther Schödel, refused to use the Chinese translation of 'Federal Republic of Germany' agreed upon in 1972. He believed that Beijing's translation had a clear political intent and insisted on using his own version on his business cards.⁷¹ After consulting linguists, the Foreign Ministry concluded that Schödel's stance was untenable, and the matter was allowed to fade despite Schödel's persistent objections.⁷²

Since the beginning of the reform and opening-up, throughout the 1980s, Beijing had already struggled to maintain a single ideological framework while simultaneously engaging in economic exchanges with the West, a dynamic that became a central feature of its foreign policy. However, West Germany did not regard this as a major obstacle in bilateral relations. This was primarily because China still outwardly maintained its goodwill towards Bonn's Germany policy, likely due to the tacit understanding between the two countries as self-proclaimed 'divided nations'. Furthermore, China did not possess significant influence over the German question and was just one of many factors affecting it. Bonn's government, aware that China's modernisation could only be achieved with its assistance rather than with that of East Berlin, remained focused on fostering relations with Beijing, thus prioritising economic cooperation over ideological disagreements.

Human Rights Viewed as a Non-Issue Under Optimistic Assumptions

Human rights emerged in the 1970s as a significant new dimension of international relations, increasingly framed around individual rights and state accountability for violations against individual citizens.⁷³ Recent scholarship focusing on socialist states has challenged earlier narratives that cast them primarily as rejecters or mere instrumentalisers of human rights, showing instead that socialist actors actively contributed to shaping the post-war global human rights regime.⁷⁴ From this perspective, Eastern European dissident movements did not simply 'import' Western liberal conceptions of human rights but developed hybrid understandings that emerged from entanglements among state socialism, the Global South and Western political thought. China likewise internalised international human rights norms to a limited extent. Drawing on official publications such as *Beijing Review*, existing research demonstrates that this process was not principally the result of sustained pressure from

⁶⁹Telegraphic dispatch from Beijing to the Foreign Office, 9 May 1987, PA AA, B 37/133628.

⁷⁰Telegraphic dispatch from Beijing to the Foreign Office, 6 May 1987, PA AA, B 37/133628.

⁷¹Günther Schödel to Herbert Weil, 2 Apr. 1981; Schödel to the Foreign Office, Department 341, 31 July 1981, 2, PA AA, B 37/142559.

⁷²Prof. Dr W. Chiao, Seminar for Oriental Languages at the University of Bonn, to the Foreign Office, 2 Apr. 1982; Prof. Dr W. Lippert, Institute for Non-European Languages and Cultures at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, to the Foreign Office, 16 Nov. 1981; Prof. Dr Helmut Martin to the Foreign Office, 18 Jan. 1982, PA AA, B 37/142559; Chinese designation of the Federal Republic of Germany, 7 Jan. 1983, 1, PA AA, B 37/142559.

⁷³Moyn emphasises the 1970s as a pivotal turning point in the history of human rights, whereas Eckel examines how economic crises, geopolitical détente and various social movements contributed to elevating the prominence of human rights during this period. See Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, eds., *The Breakthrough, Human Rights in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3, 248–9, 252–5; Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 217; Gehrig, *Legal Entanglements*, 230.

⁷⁴Ned Richardson-Little, Hella Dietz and James Mark, 'New Perspectives on Socialism and Human Rights in East Central Europe since 1945', *East Central Europe* 46, no. 2–3 (2019): 169–87.

Western governments or international organisations but rather stemmed from shifts in Chinese official perceptions and from critical reflection on China's own recent history, particularly the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁵

West Germany's engagement with human rights during the 1970s followed a largely inward-oriented trajectory.⁷⁶ While debates on the human rights implications of the Helsinki process were ongoing, China's human rights situation attracted little sustained attention. Reports from the German Embassy in Beijing offer valuable insight into perceptions of the issue at the time. During the Cultural Revolution, neither the groups persecuted due to political struggles nor related developmental issues like poverty and hunger were framed within the discourse of human rights. Only in the 1980s did embassy reporting begin to address human rights explicitly. However, assessments tended to retain an optimistic tone, framing the human rights situation in China as evolving and capable of improvement without external intervention.⁷⁷ In this context, West Germany had not yet developed a coherent, systematically articulated human rights policy during the 1970s.⁷⁸ Human rights did not form part of its catalogue of instruments for 'domesticating China'.

It was only after the arrest of the first generation of democracy activists following the onset of reform and opening that international human rights organisations began to pay sustained attention to China's human rights situation. The Chinese government, however, does not appear to have regarded this development with particular alarm. During Deng's visit to the United States, he stated explicitly that he did not wish to discuss human rights.⁷⁹ Prior to the visit, *People's Daily* selectively cited and commented on US media assessments in order to depict the Carter administration's human rights policy as moralistic, insufficiently grounded in power, strategically naïve and ultimately counter-productive.⁸⁰ When addressing the Soviet Union, by contrast, the newspaper suggested that Carter's human rights policy could function as a 'weapon', but only if combined with military, political and economic strength.⁸¹

The growing attention from human rights advocates to China's human rights record did not alter Bonn's optimistic assessment of China's evolving human rights situation. State visits between the two countries increasingly became platforms for human rights organisations to raise their concerns. When Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng visited Bonn for the first time in 1979, the German section of Amnesty International addressed a letter to him, while individual activists raised funds for newspaper advertisements to highlight human rights violations during the 'Beijing Spring' of 1979.⁸² These

⁷⁵ Dingding Chen, 'Explaining China's Changing Discourse on Human Rights, 1978–2004', *Asian Perspective* 29, no. 3 (2005): 155–82.

⁷⁶ Gehrig, *Legal Entanglements*, 236–40.

⁷⁷ In the analysis reports from the embassy in Beijing to Bonn, there was an attempt to understand China's traditional concept of human rights as collective rights, such as the liberation from exploitation and racial discrimination, while Western standards emphasising individual rights were rejected as bourgeois ideology due to the communist regime. On the other hand, the embassy highlighted China's significant efforts towards legalising society as a positive development. See Per Fischer to the Foreign Office, 17 Dec. 1986; Per Fischer to the Foreign Office regarding the human rights situation in China with reference to Amnesty International's Annual Report, 26 Oct. 1988; Status Report: Human Rights in China, Mar. 1989, PA AA, BAV 190-PEKI/33463.

⁷⁸ Philipp Rock, *Macht, Märkte und Moral: Zur Rolle der Menschenrechte in der Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010).

⁷⁹ Vance on US Relations with China and the Soviet Union, *People's Daily*, 15 Jan. 1979, 1.

⁸⁰ 'US Newspaper Article: "President Carter and the Soviets"', *People's Daily*, 20 Aug. 1978, 2.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² In the autumn of 1978, democracy activists began posting numerous handwritten posters with critical content along Xidan Street in Beijing, calling for human rights and democratic reforms. This phenomenon, known as the 'Democracy Wall', was compared by the international community to the Prague protests of 1968 and was referred to as the 'Beijing Spring'; see Frank Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979. Als die Welt von heute begann* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2019), 168.

efforts, however, received no response from Beijing.⁸³ Within the German Foreign Ministry, some officials even argued that such actions were unfriendly and counterproductive.⁸⁴

By the mid-1980s, as China's human rights record attracted growing attention within the Bundestag, and human rights advocates intensified their demands regarding issues Beijing considered internal affairs, state visits increasingly became arenas of tension between normative commitments and economic interests. This tension was evident not only in the presence of business representatives accompanying Chancellor Kohl and other ministers on their trips to China and in subsequent newspaper coverage emphasising the value of the agreements reached but also in the letters that German firms directed to federal officials when negotiations stalled. In one notable case, Chancellor Kohl personally wrote to his Chinese counterpart Zhao Ziyang to advocate on behalf of Kraftwerk Union (KWU), seeking to secure the firm a competitive advantage amid intense Western competition.⁸⁵ Moreover, the strategic imperative of supporting China's reform trajectory, which was seen as a means of exerting pressure on the Soviet Union, further complicated efforts to raise human rights concerns during bilateral talks. Maintaining a cooperative diplomatic atmosphere was widely regarded as essential, rendering the issue of human rights politically sensitive and diplomatically subordinate.

In response to growing calls to address human rights issues in China, Bonn adopted a policy of silent diplomacy (*Stille Diplomatie*), arguing that discreet engagement was often more effective and ultimately more beneficial for the individuals concerned than public statements or official condemnations.⁸⁶ Silent diplomacy – still recognised as a legitimate instrument in human rights policy at least until the 2010s – was in the 1970s a new approach that emerged alongside the expanding global human rights discourse.⁸⁷ The strategy, however, drew sharp criticism, particularly from members of the Green Party (Die Grünen) led by Petra Kelly. They warned that silent diplomacy should not become a pretext for inaction, stressing that without public engagement, it risked dulling public sensitivity to human rights violations. Members of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich Soziale Union; CDU/CSU), who defended the government's approach, were accused by Grüne parliamentarians of reacting to suggestions from the Foreign Ministry with hasty compliance.⁸⁸

In fact, a tacit interplay developed between the public pressure generated by human rights advocates and the West German government's reliance on pretextual silent diplomacy. Their actions, though lacking formal coordination, complemented one another to a certain extent and contributed to a measure of effectiveness. Under growing international criticism, the Chinese government began to address human rights issues in bilateral discussions. In March 1987, during his visit to West Germany, Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian voluntarily addressed the widely publicised student protests, condemning Western media coverage of China's campaign against 'bourgeois liberalisation' as distorted. Wu framed human rights as intertwined with Western ideological agendas, firmly rejecting calls for China to conform to Western frameworks.⁸⁹ This marked the first official Chinese response to human rights accusations within the context of bilateral diplomacy, as documented in German Foreign Ministry archives. In parallel, Beijing also pledged to improve its international image following critical German press coverage of Chancellor Kohl's 1987 visit to Tibet.⁹⁰ However, these

⁸³ Department 341, subject: Visit of Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng, 30 Oct. 1979, PA AA, B 37/110485.

⁸⁴ Memorandum, 11 Sept. 1979, PA AA, B 37/125303.

⁸⁵ Helmut Kohl to Zhao Ziyang, 16 June 1987, PA AA, B 37/142560.

⁸⁶ Helmut Schäfer, State Secretary in the Foreign Ministry, to Petra Kelly, 13 July 1987, PA AA, BAV 190/33436; Foreign Ministry to Martin Sökefeld, 15 July 1987, PA AA, B 37/142560.

⁸⁷ See for example the report of the Federal Government on its human rights policy, reporting period from 1 Mar. 2014 to 30 Sept. 2016, 107.

⁸⁸ Deutscher Bundestag, 10. Wahlperiode, 255. Sitzung, Bonn, 10 Dec. 1986, 20003.

⁸⁹ Conversation between Federal Minister Genscher and Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian, 24 Mar. 1987, PA AA, B 37/142564.

⁹⁰ Embassy Beijing to the Foreign Office, 29 July 1987, PA AA, B 37/142560.

gestures largely failed to translate into substantive change, as evidenced by the subsequent imposition of martial law in Tibet and Beijing.

Silent diplomacy was briefly abandoned after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, just as East Germany's future became entangled in the broader upheavals transforming the socialist world. The ideological solidarity between SED and Beijing intensified West German anxieties. After the violent crackdown, the SED stood out as the only regime in Europe to openly support the Chinese leadership, and it unabashedly expressed this support publicly in West Germany.⁹¹ During a visit to Neunkirchen on 7–8 June 1989, Egon Krenz, the designated successor to Erich Honecker and guest of the Saarland prime minister, claimed that the peaceful student demonstrations had been orchestrated by 'counterrevolutionaries' intent on toppling the Beijing regime and condemned what he termed the 'horror portrayals' disseminated by West German media.⁹² At the same time, the Volkskammer issued a resolution expressing its 'unqualified solidarity' with the Chinese leadership.⁹³ On 13 June, East German Education Minister Margot Honecker went further, declaring that socialism, in combative times, must if necessary be defended by force of arms.⁹⁴ This rhetoric stood in stark contrast to the graphic footage of Tiananmen broadcast on West German television and the protests that erupted in West German cities in solidarity with the demonstrators. The SED's ideological alignment with Beijing at this critical juncture, amid the broader wave of democratisation movements, indirectly complicated the process of German unification. This development was covertly recognised as a significant security concern and also raised unsettling questions about whether the East German democratic movement might face similar violent repression.⁹⁵

After carefully balancing domestic political pressures with the imperative of international coordination, Bonn made the difficult decision to impose sanctions. As the first to act, the Bundestag responded promptly by resolving on 15 June to suspend new development assistance to China and, on 23 June, taking a firmer step by calling for the suspension of capital assistance and Hermes export credit guarantees.⁹⁶ Both the draft motion and the resolution expressed concern about the SED's support for Beijing.⁹⁷ Initially, Bonn sought to coordinate its response with the European Community and the United States, resulting in a temporary freeze on high-level diplomatic contacts and a series of largely non-binding punitive measures.⁹⁸

⁹¹ East Germany's stance towards Gorbachev's reform initiatives of *glasnost* and *perestroika* reveals significant ideological affinities with China, despite markedly different tactical approaches. In Beijing, the leadership pursued controlled economic liberalisation as a means to consolidate political authority and preserve regime legitimacy, deliberately avoiding political reforms. In contrast, the SED leadership rejected even modest market reforms, fearing that economic opening would inevitably act as a conduit for political liberalisation. Both regimes, albeit through divergent strategies, sought to suppress systemic change by pre-empting the destabilising potential of reform, underscoring a shared commitment to ideological rigidity in the face of mounting international and domestic pressures. See Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 391; Gerhard A. Ritter, 'Die Volksrepublik China und die beiden deutschen Staaten 1989/90', *Historische Zeitschrift* 301, no. 1 (2015): 94–120, esp. 103.

⁹² Bertele, State Secretary, to the Federal Foreign Ministry, 29 Sept. 1989, AAPD 1989, Doc. No. 303, 1303.

⁹³ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 392.

⁹⁴ DDR-Regime rechtfertigt Massaker in Peking, accessed 11 June 2025, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/deutsche-einheit/ddr-regime-rechtfertigt-massaker-in-pekling-389976>.

⁹⁵ After the Tiananmen Massacre, many citizens of East Germany asked themselves: What will happen here if protests break out? Will Soviet tanks roll in? Will the state open fire? See Andrea Besser-Seuß, 'Der Sommer' 89: Ein Land im Aufbruch', 9 July 2023, accessed 10 Apr. 2024, <https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/ddr/deutsche-einheit/mauerfall/wende-geschichten-neunzehneundachtzig-ddr-ende-100.html>.

⁹⁶ Entschließungsantrag der Fraktionen der CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP und der Fraktion DIE GRÜNEN, Deutscher Bundestag, 11. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 11/4790, 15 June 1989; Todesurteile in der Volksrepublik China, Antrag der Fraktionen der CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP und der Fraktion DIE GRÜNEN, Deutscher Bundestag, 11. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 11/4873, 23 June 1989.

⁹⁷ Entschließungsantrag der Fraktionen der CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP und der Fraktion DIE GRÜNEN, Deutscher Bundestag, 11. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 11/4790, 15 June 1989; see also Draft Motion of the SPD Parliamentary Group (possibly also cross-party), 9 June 1989, 2, BArch, B 102/392680.

⁹⁸ Proposed talking points, 13 June 1989, PA AA, B 37/161825; Meeting of the G7 Foreign Ministers in Paris, 14 July 1989, AAPD 1989, Doc. No. 221, 995.

Although a general willingness to coordinate existed, Western political powers failed to act cohesively in practical terms. Shortly after announcing sanctions, US President George H. W. Bush unsuccessfully attempted to phone Deng and subsequently dispatched a private envoy carrying a personal letter to explain Washington's position.⁹⁹ Western European countries reacted by imposing sanctions that varied in severity and timing, briefly suspending either short- or medium-term export guarantees. Under domestic pressure, the German Interministerial Committee for Export Guarantees finally decided on 1 August 1989 to prohibit new Hermes guarantees, although previously approved commitments remained valid and a re-evaluation was scheduled three months later.¹⁰⁰

In the context of uncoordinated and inconsistent sanctions, the measures failed to achieve their intended effect and instead sparked competition among Western countries. West Germany maintained the longest sanctions regime, beginning to ease restrictions only in late October 1990, when German unification was settled. Although this year-long period of economic sanctions did not cause irreparable damage to German business interests in China, it nonetheless resulted in significant disruptions. Numerous pre-negotiated contracts were stalled due to the suspension of government-backed guarantees. At Siemens alone, more than a dozen projects were affected.¹⁰¹ Smaller firms, lacking comparable political leverage, had fewer channels to exert pressure on the federal government, meaning their difficulties were likely less visible but no less significant. German firms also faced intensifying competition from Western European counterparts who had lifted their restrictions earlier. For example, France sought to undermine Volkswagen's ongoing negotiations in Manchuria by offering a 400 million DM development credit to secure the project for itself.¹⁰² Even Siemens' metro project in Shanghai became a target of French commercial diplomacy.¹⁰³ According to a survey conducted by the Eastern Committee of the German Economy (*Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft*) during the seventh meeting of the German–Chinese Joint Commission in Beijing (5–7 November 1991), nearly all participating industries reported significant competitive disadvantages resulting from the more flexible financing options offered by other Western European countries and the United States.¹⁰⁴

Economic interest groups therefore mobilised through multiple channels to advocate for the suspension of sanctions. While their position was undoubtedly motivated by commercial self-interest, they framed their arguments within broader geopolitical and normative contexts: the comparatively lenient China policies of other Western states, the less restrictive nature of their sanctions regimes, the mounting economic pressures stemming from East Germany's integration and the potential for renewed cooperation in morally resonant fields such as environmental technologies.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹In early July 1989, US National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft held direct talks with Deng Xiaoping in Beijing. This followed President Bush's unsuccessful attempt to reach Deng by phone in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown. On 21 June, Bush sent a personal letter to Deng, which he described as a confidential communication without copies. As Ezra Vogel has noted, the relationship between Bush and Deng had deep personal roots dating back to 1974, when Bush served as the head of the US Liaison Office in Beijing prior to his appointment as CIA Director in December 1975. According to Vogel, this long-standing connection played a stabilising role in US–China relations, particularly during the strained period of the Reagan administration; see Vogel, *Deng*, 648–54.

¹⁰⁰The Interministerial Committee on Export Guarantees held an initial meeting on 6 June 1989 but decided to postpone further decisions due to the 'unclear situation in China'; see Memorandum on the Meeting of the Interministerial Export Guarantee Committee, 6 June 1989 and 7 June 1989, PA AA, B 37/161825.

¹⁰¹Memorandum, Hermes export credit guarantees vis-à-vis China, 27 Mar. 1990, BArch, B 102/391632.

¹⁰²Memorandum, 1, BArch, B 102/391612.

¹⁰³Current Situation in the PR China, 7 Nov. 1989, PA AA, B 37/161851; Department V B 3 of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs on the subway project in Guangdong (PR China), 14 June 1993, 2, BArch, B 102/427301.

¹⁰⁴Ost-Ausschuss Survey on Business with China, RWWA, 175–81–3.

¹⁰⁵With the July 1990 decision to grant federal guarantees also for exports by East German firms, the trade relations of the new federal states (Bundesländer) with China were immediately affected by the sanctions; see 'Der Bund bürgt auch für Geschäfte der ostdeutschen Unternehmen', *Der Morgen*, 29/30 Sept. 1990, 228, Annex 4, 7, BArch, B 102/391612. For example, in October 1990, the Treuhandanstalt requested guarantees from the Ministry of Economics for the Gesellschaft für Wassersysteme Dresden GmbH, established under its coordination, to secure a 100 million DM contract with China; see

These actors did not restrict their influence to bureaucratic networks within the federal government. Recognising the Bundestag's decisive role in sanction decisions, they increasingly sought to establish direct channels of communication with parliamentary bodies. In November 1989, for instance, the China Working Group of the *Ost-Ausschuss* under the leadership of Heinrich Weiss coordinated targeted discussions with deputies from key committees, including Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs, Development Cooperation and the CDU's Economic Council. These conversations framed the sanctions policy as an illegitimate politicisation of the Hermes credit guarantee system.¹⁰⁶

For many German firms, withdrawing from the Chinese market was inconceivable. Over the previous decade, they had invested heavily in building long-term ties, reflecting broader West German optimism about China's development. Negotiating with China invariably required first cultivating trust with China's political leadership. Beyond governmental initiatives such as advisory projects coordinated by the Chancellery in support of China's reforms or development-funded training centres backed by the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, private firms also proactively adapted to Chinese governmental expectations by providing training for Chinese employees in Germany.¹⁰⁷ Major corporations such as Volkswagen and Siemens financed the establishment of vocational training centres in China.¹⁰⁸ These initiatives served both to accommodate Chinese preferences and to address firms' own demand for skilled labour in their expanding Chinese operations, as representatives frequently complained about the limited availability of adequately trained personnel.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, foreign-exchange restrictions and Chinese demands for local production compelled German firms to develop supply chains within China. This posed considerable difficulties, as suitable local suppliers capable of meeting required quality standards were scarce.¹¹⁰ German firms therefore pursued a dual strategy: assisting potential Chinese producers in upgrading their technical competence and quality standards while simultaneously encouraging established German suppliers to invest in China. Small and medium-sized enterprises, however, were often far less willing or able to assume the risks associated with such ventures. Carl H. Hahn, for example, recalled Volkswagen's

Wasserversorgung und Abwasserbehandlung Dresden GmbH to Federal Minister of Economics Helmut Haussmann, 10 Oct. 1990; Treuhandanstalt Berlin to Hans-Peter Gehring, Ministerialrat at the BMWi, 10 Sept. 1990, BAArch, B 102/391612. The importance of technological cooperation with China in the environmental sector was reflected, for example, in the CDU/FDP proposal to resume export guarantees and development aid; see Draft motion by the CDU/CSU and FDP parliamentary groups, 5 Oct. 1990, 1, PA AA, B 37/161825.

¹⁰⁶Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft, Jutta Ludwig, 16 Nov. 1989, PA AA, BAV 190-PEKI/33437.

¹⁰⁷Hans-Michael Kreht of Schering's Regional Coordination unit, who supervised China-related activities across all four divisions and several subsidiaries, concluded in 1981 – following discussions with firms that had more extensive experience conducting training programmes – that German firms were hoping for a multiplier effect: upon their return, the trained specialists were expected to move into leadership roles and thereby facilitate the establishment of business contacts and the initiation of new cooperative ventures; see minutes of the China experience-sharing meeting on 24 June 1981, 5, Schering Archiv, Bayer AG, 053-002/2/1. In mechanical engineering, technical training was frequently stipulated directly in purchase contracts, with German firms committing to train the Chinese buyers' technical personnel free of charge in the fundamentals of machine operation and maintenance. One example of such an arrangement is §1.9.1 of the contract for the delivery of a 2050 mm hot strip rolling mill, concluded on 22 Dec. 1984 between the China National Technika Import Corp. and a consortium led by SMS Schloemann-Siemag AG, thyssenkrupp Corporate Archives (thA), A/36995. The chemical industry also established targeted training programmes during this period. Firms such as Hoechst, Bayer, BASF, Uhde and Lurgi cooperated with the Carl Duisberg Society (CDG) to develop training and support structures; see minutes of the China experience-sharing meeting on 24 June 1981, 6, Schering Archiv, Bayer AG, 053-002/2/1.

¹⁰⁸Scientific and Technological Cooperation (STC) with the People's Republic of China, 29 Mar. 1989, 2, PA AA, B 37/161825; Note on the Promotion of Apprentice Training at VW Shanghai by Dr Landvogt from the Consulate General Shanghai, 5 Oct. 1987, PA AA, BAV226-SHAN/17230; Embassy Beijing, 'German–Chinese Large-Scale Projects', 8 Feb. 1988, 1, BAArch, B 102/363397.

¹⁰⁹Lili Li, 'Zwischen Erwartung und Illusion: Die Logik der bundesdeutschen China-Politik 1974–1990' (PhD diss., University of Munich, 2025), 278.

¹¹⁰Martin Posth to Theodor, West German Consul General in Shanghai, 4 Dec. 1986, PA AA, BAV226-SHAN/17228.

need to exert substantial pressure on its supplier network in order to induce firms to establish operations in China.¹¹¹ Beyond these cases, many firms incurred substantial upfront investments during the 1980s without yet securing corresponding commercial returns, though they continued to expect such returns in the longer term. KWU, discussed above, exemplifies this pattern: its commitments extended well beyond extensive feasibility studies to include significant investments in training and capacity-building.¹¹² Comparable observations regarding the high temporal and initial investment costs of entering the Chinese market have also been noted in studies of Swiss enterprises.¹¹³

West German firms had become embedded in the Chinese economy through investments in training, relationship management, negotiation strategies and the construction of localised supply chains by the end of the 1980s. This fostered a symbiotic relationship that aligned German commercial interests with China's broader modernisation trajectory. Sanctions constituted not only a response to human rights concerns but also a reaction to the perceived ideological convergence between East Germany and China on this issue, at the cost of temporarily disrupting well-established economic ties. Pressure from economic interest groups gained greater political traction only once the East German factor ceased to shape the timetable and framework of German unification.

The structural complementarity between the Chinese market and West German industry, rooted in China's developmental lag and vast market potential, along with China's strategic significance for German security interests, meant that China was not perceived as a systemic rival. Rather, it appeared as a site of opportunity. This perception was further shaped by the epochal shifts of the time, including the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes and the process of German unification. In this context, Western engagement with China was framed less as a calculated strategic balancing act and more as the extension of a victorious liberal order. The prevailing sentiment was one of confidence, if not triumphalism, guided by the belief that economic entanglement would foster political convergence, and that integration into global markets would ultimately temper political authoritarianism.¹¹⁴

Conclusions

West Germany's China policy from 1974 to 1990 remained firmly embedded within the security framework of *Ostpolitik*. The governmental change of 1982 did not constitute a fundamental rupture but rather demonstrated what Eckart Conze has described as a dynamic continuity: the Kohl-Genscher government programmatically built upon the security policy orientations of its predecessor.¹¹⁵ Yet alongside this continuity, it was within conservative circles that China was 'discovered' as a geopolitical opportunity in the early 1970s.¹¹⁶ During the 1980s, the coalition government of the CDU/CSU and the Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei; FDP) acquired greater scope to mobilise China within this security framework.

China policy was fundamentally shaped by economic interests, yet these commercial imperatives were situated within a broader strategic framework that evolved in tandem with changes in the international system. As early as the 1950s, Chancellor Adenauer had predicted that tensions within the

¹¹¹ Carl H. Hahn, *Meine Jahre mit Volkswagen* (Signum Verlag, 2005), 171.

¹¹² State Secretary Dr von Würzen, conversation with the new Chinese Ambassador Mei Zhaorong, 6 July 1988, 2–3, BArch, B 102/391632; Talking points, subject: Cooperation with the PRC in the peaceful use of nuclear energy, 23 Feb. 1988, 3–4, BArch, B 102/363397.

¹¹³ Ariane Knüsel, "No Ski Shoes, Chocolate or Hairsprays": The (Mis)Adventures of European Companies in China, 1978–88', *Journal of Contemporary History* 60, no. 3 (2025): 508–30.

¹¹⁴ In recent years, historians have begun to analyse the so-called pivotal year of 1989 from new perspectives in light of disillusioning political developments. They increasingly emphasise the ambivalent consequences associated with this epochal event. Paul Betts argues that 1989 not only marked an ideological victory but also sowed the 'seeds of illiberalism'. This ambivalence is evident on multiple levels; see Paul Betts, '1989 at Thirty: A Recast Legacy', *Past & Present* 244, no. 1 (2019): 271–305.

¹¹⁵ Eckart Conze, *Die Suche nach Sicherheit* (Munich: Siedler, 2009), 584, 623.

¹¹⁶ Kay Möller, 'Germany and China: A Continental Temptation', *The China Quarterly* 147 (Sept. 1996): 709.

Sino–Soviet alliance might offer diplomatic room for manoeuvre. However, when the Sino–Soviet split peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Washington embarked on a strategic rapprochement with Beijing, Bonn remained constrained by its *Ostpolitik* and by the sensitivities of the Soviet Union. These limitations continued to shape the boundaries of West German China policy into the early 1980s. Only in the course of the 1980s did West German strategic thinking on China begin to translate into concrete policy space. From the cautious overtures of 1974, it took nearly a decade before Bonn gained the room for manoeuvre it had long envisaged in its dealings with Beijing. This shift occurred against the backdrop of an ageing Soviet leadership and a broader realignment of international power towards the West. In this context, China's domestic reforms were interpreted through a dual lens. On the one hand, they opened valuable commercial opportunities for German firms in previously inaccessible markets that appeared highly promising and vast. On the other hand, the apparent success of these reforms suggested an alternative model of socialist modernisation, one that could pressure the Soviet Union to adapt and seek greater cooperation with the West. Supporting China's reform trajectory thus served both West German economic and geopolitical interests.

This interplay between economic incentives and strategic considerations fostered an increasingly positive view of China within policy-making circles in Bonn. There emerged a cautious optimism, underpinned by a tendency to downplay ideological tensions and normative contradictions. Initiatives such as the Goethe-Institut's presence in China and Bonn's pragmatic stance on Beijing's Germany and Berlin policy exemplify this attitude. The human rights crisis of 1989 briefly interrupted this optimism, as violations in Beijing resonated against the backdrop of democratic change in Eastern Europe. The alignment of the East German SED with China's ideological posture intensified domestic political pressure in West Germany and elevated the symbolic weight of human rights in foreign policy, making them a decisive factor in the formulation of sanctions.

Yet this rupture proved temporary. Following the lifting of sanctions, West Germany's China policy assumed a fully economic orientation, but it also revealed the continuity of approaches developed during the previous two decades. German firms deepened their engagement through long-term investments in education, consulting and localised supply chains, responding to Chinese state priorities while embedding themselves more firmly in the local economy. By the late 1980s, this had produced a symbiotic relationship that made German commercial actors stakeholders in China's modernisation process. The 1989 sanctions thus not only disrupted political ties but also posed risks to carefully cultivated economic partnerships, prompting coordinated lobbying efforts from business associations. The lack of cohesion among Western allies, the pressing economic demands of German unification and the emergence of new fields of cooperation such as environmental technologies further justified a return to engagement. It was in this context that the concept of *Wandel durch Handel* first entered the discourse on Sino–German relations in the early 1990s.¹¹⁷ Rather than a sudden innovation, it expressed a policy logic that had already taken root in the preceding years.

¹¹⁷ It was only in the early 1990s that the concept of 'change through trade' (*Wandel durch Handel*) took on a new dimension with regard to China. In response to growing criticism from human rights organisations, political decision makers argued that deeper economic cooperation could, in the long run, contribute to improving the human rights situation in China. Rexrodt, 'Handel fördert Menschenrechte', *FAZ*, 6 July 1994, 154, 2; Hans Wilhelm Vahlefeld, 'Übersene Leichenberge Maos', *FAZ*, 15 July 1994, 162, 9; 'Warnung vor China-Boykott. Kohl-Reise: Siemens-Chef für Wandel durch Handel Kritik', *FAZ*, 12 Nov. 1995, 45, 1. For early criticism of *Wandel durch Handel* and a more cautious approach, see Josef Joffe, 'Wandel durch Handel', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), 13 Oct. 1988, 4.