

POLICY BRIEF

Germany rediscovers Japan. A new foreign policy on Japan under chancellor Scholz

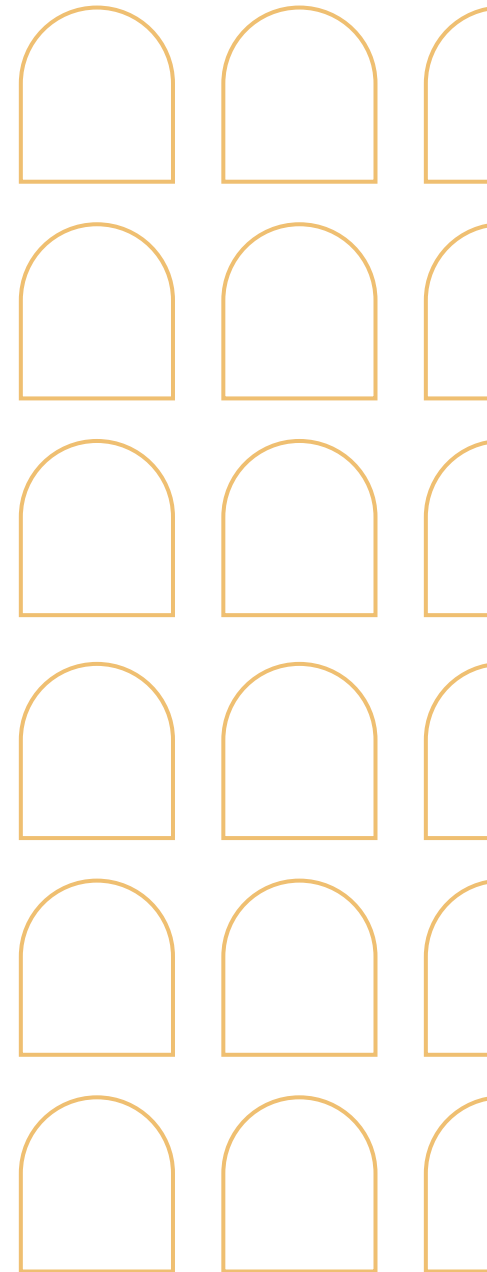
Germany's policy on Japan has changed significantly under Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The importance of Japan was enshrined in the manifesto of the three-party coalition and it has manifested in increased visits by dignitaries and political exchanges. Further increasing the importance of Japan are Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the military rise of China in Asia. Germany has rediscovered Japan as a key *wertepartner* (values partner) in Asia. This paper analyses changes in German policy on Japan from the Merkel era to the Scholz era and future policy challenges.

Merkel: indifference, confrontation and reconciliation

When analysing the Scholz government's policy on Japan, comparing it with that of Angela Merkel in her 16 years of leadership (2005-2021) is essential. This is because for some time the Merkel government was relatively uninterested in Japan, particularly in comparison with China and its rapidly expanding economy, which was particularly important for an export-dependent economy such as Germany both as a market and as a production outsourcing base for its big companies. As a result, relations between Germany and Japan cooled leading to a distance between the two countries that is in striking contrast to their closer relationship today.

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Relations between Japan and Germany, which had been indifferent, cooled significantly when the second Abe cabinet took office in 2012. At the World Economic Forum (Davos) in 2013, Merkel criticised Abenomics, the signature policy of the Abe administration which was based on fiscal expansion, monetary easing and structural reforms, describing it as “not completely without worry.” For the German coalition of the time, which insisted on fiscal discipline, the Japanese approach of boosting the economy with massive liquidity went against its own beliefs.

In 2015, on her first visit to Japan in seven years, Merkel broached the issue of comfort women, an issue that the ruling LDP party is averse to discussing, in a meeting with Japanese opposition leader Katsuya Okada, urging him to “solve the problem.” This was meant as a de facto indirect warning to the LDP. At the time, the Abe administration was applying political pressure on the opposition parties and the Japanese media critical of the administration. Under these circumstances, concerns about Japan grew in Germany and a heavyweight in the German ruling party told me that “Japan is a weak democracy”.

The political beliefs of Shinzo Abe, a historical revisionist and fiscal expansionist who wanted to restore national pride, and Chancellor Merkel, who stood for diversity and fiscal discipline, were at odds. At the time, a leader of the ruling party in Germany intimated to me that the relationship between Germany and Japan was so strong that mutual criticism would not damage it, which revealed that he did not understand the political climate in Japan. The LDP was fed up with the criticism of Japan leaking out of Germany, and a stir of anti-German sentiment was in the air. German-Japanese political relations were pushed to the brink.¹

But this trend changed in 2016. Donald Trump won the US presidential election and the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union in a referendum. The populism in the United Kingdom and the United States evoked a sense of alarm in Germany. Moreover, China, to which Chancellor Merkel was a frequent visitor, was becoming increasingly dictatorial. A search for a wertepartner that espoused de-

mocracy, the rule of law and human rights had begun, and Japan was one of the few likely candidates outside of Europe and North America, and the only one in the G7. Finally, Germany rediscovered its old partner Japan. In 2020, Germany announced its Indo-Pacific Guidelines with the aim of correcting its course from China’s dominance in diplomatic and trade relations, and the following year it dispatched a naval frigate to Japan. One of the promoters of these initiatives was the Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas.

A ‘New Stage’ under chancellor Scholz

The Scholz administration’s Japan policy can be seen as a continuation and further development of the policy in place in the last years of the Merkel administration. In other words, it is a correction of an Asia policy dominated by China and a restrengthening of relations with the democracies in the Indo-Pacific.

The emphasis on Japan was expressed in their manifesto when the three-party coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP) formed the so-called ‘traffic light coalition’ in 2021. Four countries, namely Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, were listed as “important value partners” and “intergovernmental talks” on Japan were to begin. In addition, Taiwan was mentioned in the manifesto for the first time together with the need to discourage any aggression by China and to maintain the “status quo.”

Compared to the manifesto under Chancellor Merkel, the critical tone on China had been ratcheted up, and Japan was placed centre stage as an ally. The Greens, who had long criticised Japan’s nuclear power plants, whaling and the legacy of comfort women, took a pragmatic line to avoid friction.

1 Shogo Akagawa, ‘Europe-Inside: Three mistakes made by German Chancellor Merkel during her visit to Japan,’ NIKKEI Online, 18.03.20. (<https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO84476720X10C15A3100000/>)

According to Chancellor Olaf Scholz, German-Japanese relations have entered a “new stage.”² Indeed, under the traffic light coalition German-Japanese relations have rapidly deepened.

After taking office, Chancellor Scholz boldly chose Japan instead of China as his first destination for a foreign trip to Asia. Furthermore, the intergovernmental talks, at which the Chancellor and the Foreign Ministers, Finance Ministers and other cabinet members of both countries were present, were held earlier than expected, in March 2023.

Germany had already held meetings with India and China the intergovernmental talks since 2011 under Chancellor Merkel. Japan was finally added to this list under Chancellor Scholz, with the intention of striking a balance among countries in Asian diplomacy. However, when the German ruling party initiated intergovernmental talks, the Japanese side was initially reluctant. Bilateral dialogue with an almost-full cabinet of ministers had not even been held with the United States, Japan’s closest ally. Some were hesitant about starting a dialogue with Germany seemingly out of the blue, but the German side responded enthusiastically and agreed to hold regular consultations.

Not only the federal government but also key figures in regional politics have been sequentially visiting Japan. For example, the Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia, Hendrik Wüst, chose Japan as the destination of his first full-scale foreign trip in June 2023. He is ranked as the most popular politician in Germany and is considered one of the strongest candidates to be a future German chancellor.

Three tailwinds

Three tailwinds are blowing for German-Japanese relations. The first is Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, which represents a battle between the democratic camp and authoritarian states. For Europe, the conflict cannot be reduced to the old confrontation structure of ‘Russia vs Western Europe and North America,’ which is why it has become necessary for

it to join forces with democracies in East Asia, such as Japan and South Korea. Ironically, the danger to democracy has increased the need for Japan and Germany to work together.

The second is a growing interest in economic security among both European countries and Japan. Germany believes it can learn from Japan, which is deeply connected economically with China while confronting it on its security policy. On the opposite side, Japan believes it would be reassuring to have not only the United States but also Europe on its side in the event of a Taiwan crisis. Dialogue between Germany and Japan has traditionally revolved around economics with little consideration given to security concerns, but the atmosphere is changing.

The third tailwind is political change in the Far East. With the hard-line conservative and hawkish Shinzo Abe replaced by the dove-like Fumio Kishida, Japan is more favourably disposed towards talking to Germany. Moreover, the G7 presidency was held by Germany in 2022 and by Japan in 2023, and hence the timing was right for dignitaries from the two countries to visit each other. A further positive factor is that the change of government in South Korea has markedly improved relations between Japan and its neighbour, and Germany no longer needs to consider the pecking order between Japan and South Korea when scheduling visits.

The challenge: sustainable bilateral relations?

Germany’s policy of distancing itself from China and moving closer to Japan demonstrates that it is a country that not only pursues its economic interests but also contributes to maintaining the international order in the Far East. This policy embodies modern Germany’s growing awareness of its international role as a core member of the European Union. The benefits for Japan of closer ties with Germany are also significant. It can enjoy fully fledged cooperation with Europe in supply chains and renewable energy. Above all, the addition of new Europe-Japan ties to the traditional deep alliances between

2 In March 2023, Chancellor Scholz spent about an hour with me in his office in Berlin, discussing policy on Japan and other issues. Shogo Akagawa, ‘Scholz warns China not to use force to alter Taiwan status quo,’ NIKKEI Asia, 16.03.2023. (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Scholz-warns-China-not-to-use-force-to-alter-Taiwan-status-quo>)

Japan and the United States and between Europe and the United States may well create a multilayered unified group in the democratic camp.

The challenge, however, is sustainability. Necessity has brought Germany and Japan closer together to counter Russia and China, and the schedule of international meetings, such as the G7 meetings in Germany and Japan, is also a positive factor. However, if the war in Ukraine comes to an end and no more international meetings are convened in Japan and Germany, will Germany's interest in Japan wane again? Meanwhile, in Japan the Foreign Ministry's top priority in Europe continues the post-war tradition and still remains the United Kingdom, which is out of the European Union, rather than Brussels, Berlin or Paris. It may be that Japan's policy towards Europe is outdated.

Continued efforts on both sides are essential. Russia and China are not necessarily monolithic but they are trying to cooperate with the global south to counter Japan, the United States and Europe. The future of the US after the presidential election in 2024 is also uncertain. The unity of the democracies, and the G7, is undoubtedly being tested as the international order undergoes major upheavals. Germany's major political parties, including opposition ones, could nominate heavyweight politicians to take charge of relations with Japan and democratic camps in Asia. On the other hand, Japan's ties with continental Europe, including Germany, are not especially robust. The success or failure of these relations will depend on whether Japan and Germany can broaden the base of dialogue by seizing the opportunity of Germany's turn to Japan. This is also the challenge of strengthening democratic ties and helping protect fundamental values such as freedom, democracy and human rights. Of course, Japan should also make efforts to prove that these could be universal values not Western ones.

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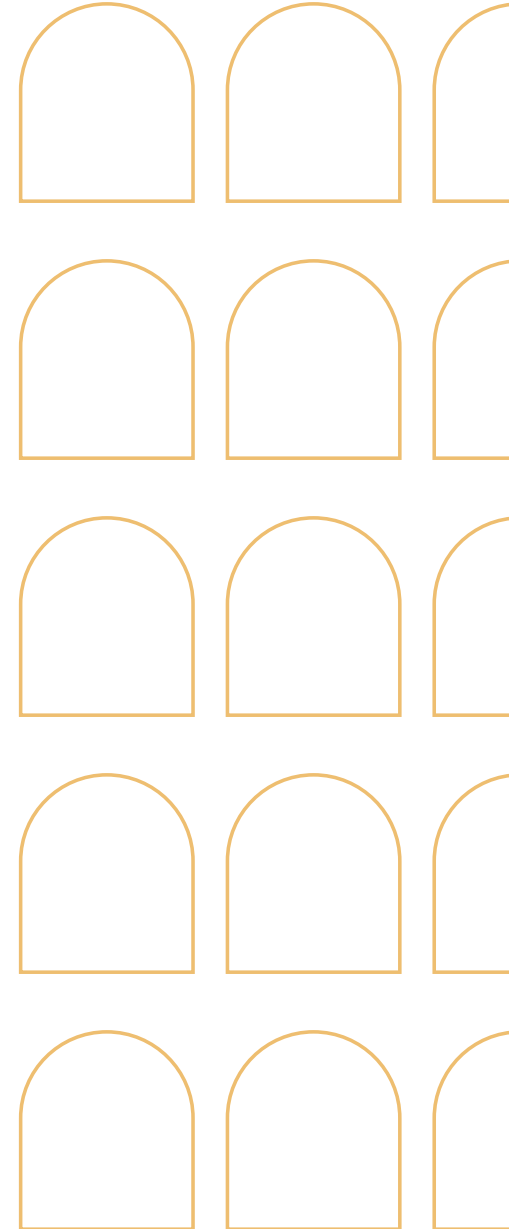
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