Hugo Meijer has analyzed one of the most pressing issues in international relations in the twenty-first century: how do countries deal with an increasingly assertive People’s Republic of China? He examines Europe’s three most important countries: France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The author argues that contrary to conventional wisdom, these countries started to alter their policies towards China around 2010. Meijer suggests that all three countries have abandoned their previous policies, which were dominated by commercial interests, and have embraced a much more nuanced and skeptical view of China.

Meijer’s book addresses an issue which is of utmost importance for European societies. To date, no other author has analysed the policies of France, Germany, and the UK more thoroughly than Meijer. The research for the book is very comprehensive and is based on both published texts, previously classified material, leaked cables and over 200 interviews.

Meijer’s book is split in two major parts. First, he looks at the regional responses of the European powers to China’s rise, asking if they have changed their approaches to the Indo-Pacific region, and, if so, how. Second, he examines the policies applied at home, analysing what France, Germany and the United Kingdom have done to address or even counter China’s assertive policies in Europe.

Meijer challenges a view that he suggests is mainstream: until recently, European foreign policies were naïve and merely looked at the economic opportunities engagement with China provided (3).1 As noted above, the author argues that the three major European powers have started to reverse their policies on China from 2010 onwards. The awakening occurred earlier than conventionally assumed, when the threat perceptions of the People’s Republic intensified and led to a partial revision of the previous policy that emphasized commercial considerations (9).

1 See, for example: Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, and Han Dorussen, eds., Security Relations between China and the European Union: From Convergence to Cooperation (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016); Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, and Uwe Wissenbach, The European Union and China (London: Red Global Press 2019); Katinka Barysch, Charles Grant, and Mark Leonhard, Embracing the Dragon: The EU’s Partnership with China (London: Center for European Reform 2005).
Meijer's choice of countries is based on the assessment that in Europe, only these three countries possess the diplomatic, economic, and military capabilities to develop a coherent political-military engagement in the Asia-Pacific region (6). Italy, which has a stronger manufacturing sector than both France and the United Kingdom, could usefully have been included.²

In each chapter, the author addresses four standard topics: economic interests, threat perceptions, policy goals and policy instruments. The selection of questions convinces and the author covers the key areas of foreign policies. However, Meijer does not discuss the theoretical foundations of his analysis. While it seems that realist thinking is the foundation of the book's analysis, a discussion of this would have clarified matters. There is also a lack of critical reflection of the “rules-based order,” which lacks institutions that enforce those rules. The lack of uniform rules, which are also applicable to the United States, has enabled China to violate existing rules without severe repercussions.³

Meijer convincingly argues that none of the three European powers is strong enough to develop a sufficiently powerful response and balance against China (21). At the same time, all three countries have very distinct historical experiences in the Asia-Pacific region and consequently implement quite diverging approaches.

The chapter on France contains a meticulous table with all the journeys of French capital ships in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. That dimension of his research makes Meijer's book very useful for scholars of international relations and security strategists. France is of course an established power in the region. It continues to have territories and about 1.6 million French nationals live there. France has a much more robust military presence in the Indo-Pacific than both Germany and the United Kingdom. President Macron has indeed voiced concern about China's foreign policy earlier than other European politicians. Whilst France has significant commercial interests in China, some of them are in areas where there is no significant competition.⁴ Commercial aircraft can either be purchased from Airbus or from Boeing. Of course, China would prefer to make planes at home, but the China-made Comac C 919 is still not fully operational and requires foreign-made engines and aviation electronics. Airbus secured an order for almost 300 single-aisle planes in July 2022.⁵ Apart from the fact that none of these planes can fly long-range, in the current market Airbus has hardly any competitors. Although Airbus is a European joint venture, the company is headquartered in France, and so the planes are counted as French exports. Thus, the French government has less reason to worry about a reduction of trade with China than Germany, where many exporters are exposed to competition.

It is of course not surprising that Germany’s China policy has long been driven by economic interests. Meijer could have provided more detailed information on the diverging scale of trade between European economies and China. Before the pandemic, Germany exported more to China than the next eight European economies, including the United Kingdom, combined. But Meijer overestimates the change in German foreign policy before 2021. He cites the framework for the Indo-Pacific region as evidence that the German government had changed its policies before 2021 (63).

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⁴ Martine Bulard: Kommt eine pazifische Nato? Le Monde Diplomatique, 10 June 2021, 1, 6, 7.

That assessment is clear, in contrast to the “Leitlinien” (policy guidelines). The white paper is a lengthy (seventy-two pages) piece which above all lacks priorities. Meijer suggests that the framework demonstrates that the “traditionally ‘reluctant’ European power has awakened to the security implications of China’s rise and has therefore sought to strengthen its role in Asian-Pacific security” (63). My reading is that the Leitlinien demonstrate the opposite: Germany is still reluctant, at least in the Indo-Pacific area. Under the auspices of former Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, the white paper listed everything the German government was contributing to in the region. The summary is eleven pages long. One of the pleas is for strengthening multilateralism, which appears to ignore the very fact that China’s policies have contributed to the crisis of multilateralism in the first place. Of course, China is not the only country that has been undermining the World Trade Organization for example.7

What Meijer calls “multipronged efforts” (87) are in fact a reflection of Germany’s military weakness, a point Meijer himself makes: “Berlin faces profound capability shortfalls” (87). In short, Germany cannot have an Indo-Pacific military strategy because of the weak state of its armed forces.8 It therefore emphasizes the importance of every other issue. Of course, that approach may be justifiable, and there may not be an alternative. But Meijer’s conclusion with regard to Germany misses that crucial point.

The quintessential European Indo-Pacific power is of course the United Kingdom with its long and difficult colonial history. Britain has been a very active player in the region since the seventeenth century. British leaders were eager to increase its economic presence in the Indo-Pacific in the 2010s and were courting China with pomp.9 In 2015, Queen Elizabeth and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping travelled in a golden coach to Buckingham Palace.10 Today, these images are not too popular in Britain. Both China’s rejection of the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague and, perhaps even more important, China’s violation of the 1984 treaty on Hong Kong have resulted in a profoundly more sceptical perception of China in Downing Street. In 2020, the invitation of then Prime Minister Boris Johnson to three-million citizens of Hong Kong to migrate to Britain was a robust reaction to the introduction of the so-called security law in Hong Kong.11

In all three countries examined by Meijer, there has been a growing recognition that doing business with China is dangerous: Chinese state-owned companies may buy European technologies rather than invest in new factories. The telecommunication giant Huawei has attracted particular attention (134). Whilst it is clear that Huawei is not a private company independent of government influence, the advocates of restrictions on the use of Huawei equipment have not yet shown a smoking gun (188). However, critics fear that Huawei equipment can secretly transfer data to China.

An important point is the lack of reciprocity in China’s trade practices (148). This point is of course as important in Ottawa or Canberra as it is in Paris. Chinese companies are protected and the level of subsidies

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7 On the US blockade of the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanism see for example Jens Lehne, Crisis at the WTO: Is the Blocking of Appointments to the WTO Appellate Body by the United States Legally Justified? (Berlin and Bern: Carl Grossmann Verlag, 2019).


10 New China TV, “President Xi Jinping Rides in Royal Carriage on Way to Buckingham Palace,” You Tube video, 2:50, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7la3YayQFQ

to Chinese companies is unclear. However, the problem is certainly not limited to China: many countries have embraced subsidies, for example, to beef-up their semiconductor manufacturing. In that sense the rest of the world is copying China’s example. These types of policies that favour self-sufficiency have a long and shady tradition and harm consumers and taxpayers.

With regard to Germany’s perceived pivot away from China, Meijer’s argument is most probably too optimistic. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has thus far not demonstrated that he is eager to “forge a comprehensive, cross-sectoral ‘China policy’ and…encouraged greater intra-European coordination” (194). Quite the opposite: Scholz’ journey to Beijing at the beginning of November 2022 was both an unnecessary signal of support for Xi and a rejection of Macron’s suggestion that there should at least be a joint visit of the German Chancellor and the French leaders. The current German government is divided on China—Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock favours a tough stance on China, Chancellor Scholz does not. But there is ample pressure from Big Business—BASF, Bosch, Siemens and Volkswagen in particular—which emphasizes the need to engage with China. These influential players continue to see plenty of opportunities in China and are not at the least interested in closing their factories there.

Meijer’s conclusion is sober yet accurate: “Only the future will tell if Europeans can come together and develop and credible role on the world stage…” (241). Indeed, more than a modicum of optimism is required for that vision. Meijer has meticulously demonstrated that there have been changes in the China policies of France, Germany and the United Kingdom. But Britain’s exit from the European Union is not the only reason for the difficulty in formulating a joint approach towards China. The current as well as the previous German governments are also to blame. For the time being, France appears to be the most constructive player in devising a joint European approach, but to no avail.

The thoroughness of the book makes it an attractive book for highly specialized researchers. Given the hefty price tag of €91.70, it is not clear that it will reach the non-specialist readers.

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