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Hans-Ulrich Seidt

**Korea and Germany as Endpoints of
the New Silk Road: Opportunities for
Cooperation**

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Hans-Ulrich Seidt

Abstract

The transforming world of the 21st century has entered a new era. It is characterized by geo-political conflicts, controversial grand strategies and disruptive events. Over the next years, the Sino-American competition will throw a dark shadow over international relations, global mega-infrastructure projects and the world's maritime trade routes. The current situation highlights the need for a renewed multilateralism and closer cooperation between like-minded countries like the Republic of Korea and Germany.

Keywords

German-Korean cooperation, China's grand strategy, U.S. threat assessment, great power competition, new silk road

Author

Ambassador (ret.) Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Hans-Ulrich Seidt is Berlin Fellow of the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University and President of the German-Korean Innovation Center (InDeKo), an independent think tank and consulting group. He served from 2009 to 2012 as German ambassador to the Republic of Korea.

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Introduction

Thirty years after the end of the cold war the world now realizes that it has entered a new era. It is characterized by great power competition, conflicting grand strategies and disruptive events. Three weeks ago, we witnessed such a disruptive moment when the Suez Canal was blocked by a huge container ship. According to the German tabloid “Bild Zeitung” ordinary citizens suddenly realized that they were directly affected. The headline “Our summer is in danger!” (Bild March 28) demonstrated that Western consumers will become interested in geopolitics and strategic infrastructure when their supply of garden equipment is under attack.

This conference will look far beyond individual interests. Your objective is to analyze and better understand the political dynamics and strategic risks the world is facing. Together you want to identify the prerequisites for a peaceful and prosperous future – not only for Korea and Germany as endpoints of Eurasian infrastructure, but for the whole international community.

Let me at the start of the conference share with you some thoughts that came to my mind when I read your program and reflected on previous experiences. I remembered observations of transformation and change during my years in Korea. These souvenirs were followed by concerns about competing strategies in Beijing and Washington. But in the end a rather bleak outlook on increasing risks and current threat assessments was balanced by positive perspectives of Korean-German cooperation.

Experience of transformation

The decline and fall of the former Soviet Union and the rise of the People’s Republic of China fundamentally changed during the last thirty years the equation of power on the Eurasian land-mass. At the same time the supremacy of the United States, which enjoyed in the decade before the turn of the century the privilege of nearly uncontested global leadership, was challenged by failed military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial crisis of 2008 and increasing domestic tensions (Farrow 2018). And all over the world the rapid development of modern communication technologies has put into question accepted traditions, political routines and ideological concepts.

The impact of transformational trends can be observed in a diverse and fragile international system, in changing patterns of social cohesion and human behavior. I was able to study this phenomenon together with my Korean students when I was teaching as guest professor at Chonnam National University in Gwangju/Korea a couple of years ago. In a situation of reverse mentoring the students, representatives of the generation called “the millennials”, taught me how they were perceiving, living and embracing transformational processes.

As bright young people they were confronted with all the consequences of a changing society. They were well aware that their expectations of life were not only determined by individual decisions, but were also linked to historical events and social developments. They talked about their family’s experience in Gwangju and Chonnam province, a part of Korea that in the local perception was often neglected and even discriminated by the political center. They welcomed the opportunities of liberal democracy, an open society and modern infrastructure, but at the same time they critically reflected about the consequences of demographic change and technological progress. And they felt that their individual future was inextricably linked to a broadly connected global community and, in particular on the Korean peninsula, to an aggregate of collective desires and disappointments.

As capital of Chonnam province, the south western region of the divided peninsula, Gwangju is hopeful to become one day like the city of Busan one of the end points of the railroad system that will connect the Eurasian landmass from the Atlantic to Korea, a country that exemplifies the dramatic, often tragic events and profound changes that took place in East Asia since the beginning of the 20th century. Standing one cold winter morning at the counter of Pyongyang train station, I thought about the impact of these changes on the Korean nation. From a friendly lady I received my ticket for the train that would bring me to the Chinese city of Dandong and from there to Shenyang with its huge BMW plant. The ticket was printed in Korean, Chinese, Russian and German. From my interpreter I learned that in Pyongyang you can even buy a ticket for a train ride to Berlin. But will it ever be possible to buy a ticket for Gwangju or Busan via Seoul and cross the demarcation line on the 38th parallel by train?

Horizon scanning became extremely difficult during the last years and my crystal ball is not better than yours. Certainly, we all were observing long-term trends during the last decades. We saw the Republic of Korea and the Peoples Republic of China moving forward rapidly. In the 21st century both are now playing lead roles in many fields of science and technology. While South Korea developed an amazing set of soft power tools, China became the strongest country on the Eurasian-African landmass.

But even long-term trends can be disrupted. When the pandemic broke out in Wuhan at the end of 2019, many China watchers asked: What will happen to the Chinese economy, the country’s political system and the surrounding region (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2020)? Today

we know the answer: More than one year after the outbreak of Covid-19, we recognize that East Asia, at least for the time being, remains the dynamic and driving hub of the world's economy.

China's grand strategy

Against this transformational background your conference will address specific questions: How can middle powers and export driven economies like the Republic of Korea and Germany further benefit from ever closer ties across Eurasia? Can they participate in mega-sized infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative or the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline without becoming entangled into conflicting strategies? How can they avoid becoming totally dependent from the interests and the designs of competing great powers?

I keep these and similar questions in mind since a three months tour through China in spring 2016, when as Inspector General of the German Foreign Office I had to inspect our embassy in Beijing and our consulates general throughout China. During my tour I visited Chengdu in landlocked Sechuan province, where a Chinese official proudly informed me about the regular train service between his province and the city of Duisburg in Germany. He was surprised by my question "Why Duisburg?" and immediately gave the answer: "Of course Duisburg! It is the inland port of Rotterdam!" During the following conversation I realized that my Chinese interlocutor fully understood the details of the geo-economic landscape and the infrastructure of Western Europe.

Visiting two weeks later China's top institution of higher education, Beijing University, I asked the head of the German department: "Which text are you reading with your graduate students?" Her answer was: "The 'Political Dialogue' by Leopold von Ranke". Although this text is one of the most important documents of German political thought in the 19th century it is little known in Germany itself. And when shortly afterwards a deputy minister in Beijing told me that he and his wife, a successful entrepreneur, had carefully studied Karl Marx, he confessed that "Das Kapital" had been the inspiration for his wife's successful business career.

Now I began to understand how carefully classical German texts like Ferdinand von Richthofen's "The Silk Roads" and Carl von Clausewitz' "On War" (Yu Tiejun 2011) were read in China. Their political and economic teachings were not only studied. They were analyzed, reviewed, skillfully combined and finally integrated into a larger strategy. In this comprehensive context and in a new, contemporary environment they became instruments of operational planning and practice.

Before my eyes I saw a rough sketch of China's strategy and tried to understand how the country utilizes all available means to achieve desired ends. How does a great power with a

history of more than two thousand years adapt to the complexities of contemporary policy-making and a changing global distribution of power and wealth? Since I was not trained to engage in philosophical disputes and moral debates, my answer is a very simple interpretation of China's strategy, its main objectives, its strengths and weaknesses. The perception reflects realistic main-stream thinking. However, while your conference will discuss technical and economic issues, you should also remember that even these so-called non-political problems are in reality linked to collective ambitions and emotions.

In my view, the main elements of China's long-term plan became evident since the day the country joined the WTO, the World Trade Organization, at the end of 2001. The strength of China's current position lies in the coordinated and systematic approach that characterizes a grand strategy (Gaddis 2018). Beijing's global outreach covers five critical areas, namely the economic, political, scientific/technological, military and cultural domains. In 2013, China's new leadership under Xi Jinping publicly branded the core elements of the strategy as a coherent geopolitical program under the banner of "One Belt – One Road" or "Belt and Road Initiative" (Johnson 2016). In 2017, the initiative was incorporated into China's constitution with the clear objective to create until the middle of the century a revised global order which secures China's interests and matches Beijing's worldview. Nevertheless, China's weaknesses and vulnerabilities remain critical. They are the lack of natural resources, serious regional imbalances, ethnic strife in border provinces and, in the long-run, the dangers of a petrified authoritarian system.

Out of the most important instruments of China's strategy I will discuss in detail only the so-called "New Silk Road", the economic belt along a transportation network through Western China, Central Asia and finally across the whole Eurasian-African landmass. But even more important is the so-called "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". The volume of sea transport will remain substantially higher than the volume of land transport and the costs much lower. Within the framework of China's grand strategy, infrastructure investments along the coast and on land will include the worldwide construction of artificial islands, ports, canals, railroads, tunnels and airports. These projects will open new trade and transport options. At the same time, they will facilitate direct or indirect control of major transit corridors and of maritime trade routes.

China's strategic objectives and its operational instruments clearly reflect the vital interests and concerns of a rising great power that depends on the import of raw materials and the export of manufactured goods. The recent accident of a container ship in the Suez Canal demonstrated how China depends on a few geo-strategic choke points. The Suez Canal remains a key transport artery between producers in China and consumers in Europe (Global Times, March 30).

Western vulnerability and American threat assessment

But the international debate on strategic risks, vulnerability and resilience had started long before the incident in the Suez Canal, the Covid-19 pandemic or shortages in the imports of drugs, pharmaceutical material and vaccines. In the United States and also in the European Union the growing strength of China was already watched for many years with mixed feelings and growing concern.

On the one hand, both the European Union and the United States want to preserve the liberal world order. From the perspective of the United States this also means the continued guarantee of its unique, hegemonic status as the world's lead nation. On the other hand, both actors increasingly realize that even within the existing international environment China is catching up quickly and will be able to implement its grand strategy step by step.

The members of the European Union certainly have reasons for concern. In the Brussels headquarter the extreme weakness of governance structures is evident during every crisis the European Union is facing. Its economic effectiveness and social attractions are declining. A joined political and strategic position vis-à-vis Beijing's grand strategy does not exist. Some member states in Central and Eastern Europe are participating in the 17 plus 1 format initiated by Beijing. Italy and Greece have joined the Belt and Road Initiative. And although Paris and Berlin are ambivalent, Germany keeps in mind the immense Chinese market and its importance for the export and investment interests of its companies.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Washington is confronted with the consequences of imperial overstretch and a permanent, structural trade deficit. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was thought to bring countries around the Pacific closer to the United States by reducing their dependence on China. The TPP trade agreement between Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam was signed in February 2016. But Donald Trump, the newly elected president, withdrew the presidential signature immediately after his inauguration in January 2017. The agreement was not ratified and did not enter into force. The domestic debate on TPP demonstrated, that even before the Trump presidency, the United States started to tear itself apart economically, politically and socially.

Already in 2007, on the eve of the international financial crisis, a study was published that addressed strategic concerns on the increasing Western dependency on Asia. The authors were high ranking officers of major NATO countries. Their study "Towards an overall strategy in an uncertain world – Renewing the transatlantic partnership" (Naumann 2007) revealed a wide range of regional and global risks. It predicted that the strategic challenges of the 21st century would emerge as multi-dimensional threats. According to the study's assessment Western societies were not prepared for a sudden and drastic collapse in vital supply that

might be caused by major unrest affecting Asia's high-tech industry, for example in Bangalore, the global center for the inhouse software of major Western companies. For the authors the vulnerability of the West through the new dependence on the services and production of Asia was as strong as the European dependence on the oil of the Middle East.

In 2021 the global threat assessment has, at least in Washington, moved much farther. At the beginning I mentioned that the organizers of the conference had chosen the right moment to discuss a crucial topic you may call the question of the decade. This was not only a polite remark. It was also a specific reference to the annual report issued by the Director of National Intelligence of the United States exactly ten days ago on April 9, 2021 (U.S. 2021). The document, the first official threat assessment under President Biden's new administration, identifies the United States' key adversaries and competitors. However, it notably excludes an assessment of their vulnerabilities and vital interests.

According to the current report, China is the top threat to the interests of the United States. The intelligence community in Washington evaluates Beijing's increasingly competitive relationship with the United States as part of an epochal geopolitical shift. China wants to return into the center of world politics and will thus remain the main competitor of the United States. Beijing uses its coordinated strategic tools to expand China's economic, political, and military presence. Washington expects that the Chinese leadership will consistently promote major infrastructure projects throughout the world with the help of the "Belt and Road Initiative" and the so-called "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". At the same time, Beijing wants to establish in its near abroad effective and exclusive control over major maritime trade routes in the South China and East China Sea.

The 2021 threat assessment signals remarkable continuity and increasing concern. Already in September 2018 an Interagency Task Force had presented a report to President Trump under the title "Assessing and Strengthening the Manufacturing and Defense Industrial Base and Supply Chain Resiliency of the United States" (U.S. 2018). This report was accompanied by a classified "Action Plan" which included direction to the Department of Defense. It specifically focused on technologies necessary to win a protracted cold war. There is no doubt: The United States and China are upgrading their own resilience and preparing for protracted Sino-American competition. Washington focusses on the Indo-Pacific. The Quad, a platform for strategic coordination among the United States, Japan, Australia and India, facilitates intelligence sharing and informal military coordination. The recent meeting of President Biden and the prime minister of Japan as well as renewed efforts to bring the Republic of Korea on board fit into the picture. But will the competing great powers recognize their mutual vulnerability? Will they accept that neither Washington nor Beijing will have the monopoly of global hegemony? Will

they be satisfied with a status of interdependence and a guarantee that both sides will have full cover insurance for their homeland security?

In the shadow of great power competition

The Sino-American competition will throw a dark shadow over international relations in the years to come. Possible consequences will be discussed during your conference. At the same time, the competition of great powers highlights the need for closer cooperation among smaller countries like the Republic of Korea and Germany. For more than five decades they have cooperated as close friends and partners. They share common interests. When they compete on global markets they do so as friendly competitors, because they understand their mutual concerns.

In the political domain, the Republic of Korea and Germany both are concerned about the perspectives of a Sino-American competition that might escalate into a confrontational antagonism. In their best interest is an international system based on generally accepted rules and procedures, consistent multilateralism and de-escalation in conflict situations. This also remains true when we enter the economic domain. Here an internationally coordinated approach to the construction and diversification of strategic infrastructure seems necessary. During the last two centuries too many conflicts broke out over the direct or indirect control of major transit corridors or maritime trade routes. They were the result of increasing political tensions and legal disputes.

Therefore, the status of the world's key strategic infrastructure should, where ever possible, be regulated in internationally accepted, multilateral agreements or regimes. During the cold war, arms control regimes and confidence building measures were successfully negotiated in international fora like the CSCE, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The regime of the Non-Proliferation Treaty is controlled by the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. Could the classical approach of multilateral negotiations and agreements, which was so successful in the second half of the 20th century, not be repeated in the domain of strategic infrastructure and trade routes? Should the Republic of Korea and Germany as endpoints of a new silk road not take the lead to formulate the necessary initiatives, for example in the framework of the G 20?

Let me be more specific. Freedom of navigation is not only the cornerstone of international maritime trade, it is indispensable for the vital interests of export driven national economies like the Republic of Korea and Germany. During my tenure in Seoul, the first round of a Korean-German dialogue on maritime security took place. Together both sides discussed not only the

rights of navigation on the high seas, but also the passage in international straits like the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Since 1936 the Montreux Convention regulates the control of these straits and guarantees the free passage of civilian vessels in peacetime. The Montreux Convention could be put into question by the Istanbul Canal project which in the interpretation of the Turkish government will not be subject to the terms of the 1936 regime (Lund 2021). This is only one example for the challenges international freedom of navigation might face in the future. Negative impacts on maritime trade and the consequences for Korean and German interests are evident.

The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea was established as an intergovernmental organization in 1982. It is based in Hamburg and its current president is the Korean judge Paik Jin-hyun, an eminent scholar of international maritime law. Both in Germany and in Korea the knowledge and the expertise for a joined initiative are available. Both countries should become pro-active and launch together with like-minded partners an initiative that decreases potential threats to international trade by strengthening the multilateral approach to maritime security. As far as Germany is concerned, it should in addition promote within the European Union common infrastructure projects that stimulate the European vision and offer concrete material advantages for the young generation through jobs and economic growth. A coherent, strategic European infrastructure project could not only balance China's grand strategy but also renew Europe's optimism at a time when many Europeans are asking themselves: Why are the Chinese building a train route from Budapest to Belgrade and not the members of the European Union? How long do we have to wait for a European Marco Polo project for the 21st century”?

Innovation along the new silk roads

Finally, Korea and Germany should avoid the shadows of great power competition by cooperating in the domain of innovation and technology. Here both countries are, according to international rankings, lead nations in their own right. Of course, every ranking method has its advantages and disadvantages. But if we take for example the “Bloomberg Innovation Index 2019” (Bloomberg 2019), Korea was ranked as number 1, followed by Germany as number 2. Based on six factors, namely investment in research and development, production, high-tech-companies, numbers of patents, university graduations and relevant research personal, the Bloomberg ranking at least indicates the innovation capacities of both countries. Direct investment in joined research and development projects make both countries less dependent in strategic domains. They could become more secure from political and physical shock waves that might temporarily interrupt their connections and supply chains. In critical situations both countries could thus become stabilizing factors in an otherwise fragile environment.

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