

Merkel strengthened China in Japan

Kamil Frymark

The visit that Angela Merkel paid to Japan between 8 and 10 March was linked to Germany's presidency of the G7 in 2015. The main topics of the meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe were Germany's priorities in the G7 (including the strengthening of the position of women on the labour market, co-operation with Africa, development co-operation, climate protection) as well as an intensification of scientific collaboration and the negotiations of a free trade agreement between the EU and Japan. At the press conference Merkel and Abe ruled out the possibility for Russia to return to the G7 in the immediate future. In 2016 Japan will hold the G7 presidency.

In her speech on historical policy Angela Merkel presented the German way of holding its history to account, "thanks to this Germany was able to return to the community of nations". Chancellor Merkel also pointed out that territorial disputes between the states of Eastern Asia (including those over islands on the South China Sea) are threatening the stability of the region and security of marine routes. Merkel stated that such conflicts should be settled on the basis of international law and with the participation of regional co-operation forums such as ASEAN.

Commentary

- In her speech on the politics of memory Merkel emphasised the position of China in its historical debate with Japan; China has been reproaching Japan for ignoring its own crimes committed during World War II, including those perpetrated on Chinese civilians. The fact that Angela Merkel presented Germany as an example of a country holding the past to account was intended to put pressure on the government in Tokyo and also to demonstrate that Germany performed this task in an exemplary manner.
- The support pledged by Chancellor Merkel in the Japanese-Chinese dispute over history revealed the disproportion in Germany's relations with China and Japan. China is a strategic partner for Germany in Eastern Asia. This has been reflected for example by intergovernmental consultations (Berlin is not holding similar consultations with Japan) and the regularity of mutual state visits (last time Merkel went to Japan was in 2008, whereas over that time she visited China five times, most recently in 2014). Furthermore, in recent years China's importance for Germany's economy has grown (between 2001 and 2011 trade between the two countries increased by 430% and in 2013 it reached 140 billion euros. To compare, trade with Japan stood at 38.9 billion euros). The exceptionally dynamic development of economic co-operation has contributed to an intensification of

political contacts. This can also be seen in Germany's intention of joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that is being established under the auspices of China. The US and Japan are critical of this move and it may divide the G7 during the German presidency.

- The visit to Japan was the last in a series of visits to G7 countries that Chancellor Merkel undertook with the aim of consulting Germany's priorities for the G7 presidency. Germany has selected priorities linked with the internal policy it is pursuing. In March the Bundestag adopted a law on gender parity on the supervisory boards of joint stock companies, thus strengthening the position of women on the labour market. Germany is also pushing to adopt ambitious climate goals at the UN climate conference to be held in Paris towards the end of 2015. As the country leading the G7 it will have a fundamental impact on the stance the G7 takes and will encourage others to draw on the experience of Germany's energy transformation