

WORKING PAPER

An Analysis of Germany's Suspicions about "16+1 Cooperation" and China's Possible Countermeasures - From the Perspective of European Integration

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Abstract

The mechanism of "16+1 Cooperation" between China and the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) is fruitful in recent years and is welcome in the CEECs, which causes a high degree of vigilance in Germany, who has extensive interests in the CEECs. Germany sees "16+1 Cooperation" as a threat to its vested interests in the EU, and suspects that it would hinder the European integration. Germany has a major impact on EU's China policy, while the EU affects the development space of "16+1 Cooperation" through laws and rules. Therefore, understanding Germany's concerns and seeking solutions for China to reduce misperceptions and misjudgments of Sino-EU relations is at all imminent.

After the Cold War, the reunited Germany gradually became the dominant force in the EU and was one of the main proponents of the EU's eastward expansion. Germany takes CEE as its political and economic strategic "backyard", which has important geo-strategic values for Europe and core interests for Germany. In fact, as the biggest beneficiary of European integration, Germany's core pillar is its European policy. However, the EU is suffering a very difficult time. It suffers from the Ukrainian crisis, the European refugee crisis, terrorist attacks, Brexit, the conflicts between East and west, North and south in Europe become increasingly intensive, and the trend of anti-globalization, anti-EU, nationalism and populism are on the rise in the EU. On this basis we can understand where Germany's suspicions about the "16+1 Cooperation" come from.

This article is devoted to answering the following questions based on the theory intergovernmentalism and the realistic concept of national interests: 1) What kind of suspicions does Germany have about the "16+1" initiative and why? 2) What kind of impact does Germany have on the EU's policy toward China? 3) What countermeasures can be taken by China? These questions will be analyzed on the basis of national interests, intergovernmentalism and Zero-sum game from the perspective of European integration.

The following conclusions are drawn from the analysis: 1) Germany's suspicions of "16+1 Cooperation" stem from two aspects. On the one hand, there are concerns that the vested interest pattern might be shocked in the field of economy and trade relations between Germany and the CEECs, which might affect Germany's dominant position in the EU. On the other hand, there are fears that the European integration might be undermined in these troubled times. 2) In terms of national interest, Germany can't get rid of the zero-sum logic. 3) The EU is still a "confederation" rather than "federation". Germany's attitude shows a lack of confidence in the current development of European Integration. 4) Since Germany and the CEECs are divided and even antagonistic over some EU issues in recent years, Germany's consideration of CEE as its strategic "backyard" seems to be a "wishful thinking". 5) Germany's suspicions are understandable but not reasonable, China has countermeasures.

Keywords: *“16+1 Cooperation”, Germany’s suspicions, Chinas countermeasures, European integration*

Introduction

Since the “16+1” mechanism was established in 2012, the Chinese and European political and academic circles have paid much attention to the connotation, operation, influence and prospect of the “16+1” mechanism, researches were conducted on topics like the necessity and mode of the China-CEE cooperation and its coordination with the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the Sino-EU relations. The fact that China and the CEECs have further promoted cooperation after the “Suzhou Summit” has led to misunderstandings because of the large trade share of the CEECs in the European Union, especially in Germany, its geopolitical significance to Germany, as well as its importance to the development of European integration. Therefore, this paper analyzes Germany’s suspicions about the “16+1 Cooperation” based on the theory of European integration, and seeks solutions for China to avoid resulting in too much misunderstandings and misjudgments on Sino-EU relations.

Methodology

1. Materialism Methodology of Marx: A Combination of Theory and Practice

Through a combination of theoretical study and empirical analysis, the causes of Germany’s skepticism about the “16+1 Cooperation” and its impact on Sino-EU relations are to be explored, and countermeasures will be proposed for China.

According to the theory of intergovernmentalism in the European integration theory, Germany is regarded as the main actor and driving force of the integration process, which leads to the prerequisite for the analysis: Germany’s doubts about “16+1” will greatly affect the EU’s policy towards China.

Germany’s interests and values oriented foreign policy determines that its interest in the CEE region is an important factor affecting its foreign policy, especially its European policy. Because Germany sees its interests in CEE and the “16+1 Cooperation” as mutually exclusive according to the Zero-sum game logic, it therefore throws doubt upon China’s initiative.

Combined with the above theories, the empirical analysis as an evidence-based approach will be used to explore the interest relationship between Germany and the CEECs over the years in terms of import and export trade, direct investment, as well as development assistance, in order to figure out their impact on Germany’s attitude towards “16+1 Cooperation” and the Sino-EU relations.

2. Literary Analysis

By collecting, reorganizing and analyzing Chinese, German, and English literatures and documents about the European integration theory, the interest relations among Germany, CEECs and China, as well as the “16+1” mechanism, on which the theoretical and empirical analysis was based, the core issues such as Germany’s interest characteristics in CEE and suspicions about China will be settled step by step.

Main body

1. An Analysis of Germany's Suspicions about "16+1 Cooperation"

Sigmar Gabriel, the former German foreign minister, said in a speech in 2017 that China's "16+1 Cooperation" was a threat to European unification and even called on EU members to establish a common foreign policy in response. Reinhard Bütikofer, vice-chairman of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with China, also expressed the same view in the German magazine "Der Spiegel" in 2018. In fact, the "16+1" initiative provides more diversified and complementary trade channels, more investments and financing channels to the CEECs, which will obviously promote the CEECs' development, balance the economic and social development in Europe, and benefit the EU and European integration. So why does it incur misrepresentations, assumptions and accusations from Germany?

1.1 Germany's Protectionist Tendency in its "Backyard"

Germany's suspicions about "16+1 Cooperation" are in essence a manifestation of excessive protection of its vested interests in the CEECs, because Germany sees the CEE region as its destined space in history as well as its political and economic "backyard" at present.

Germany is committed to developing CEE into its political "backyard". The CEE region has an important geopolitical value in the world politics, especially for Germany. It has been historically regarded as a politically destined space for Germany.ⁱ After the Cold War, it became the strategic buffer zone of European security, and the key barrier to prevent the Russian forces towards the West. Its "returning to Europe" is a necessity of history and the inevitable requirement of European integration. The accession of the CEECs to the EU means a lot to Germany, which is conducive to enhancing Germany's international status and creating a favorable international environment for its development.

Besides, the CEECs have a significant impact on Germany in international crisis management. If CEECs fall into a long-term crisis, it will have a negative impact on Germany in many ways. For example, long-term poverty and unemployment will undermine the EU reform process, therefore not only the "order policy" will be affected, but social crises may also appear, so that immigration pressures increase in this region.ⁱⁱ For another example, in the management of European refugee crisis, the four countries of Visegrad were opposed to Germany on the issues of opening borders and refugee settlements, thus hindered Germany from managing the crisis successfully. From this perspective, CEE has a significant influence on Germany in handling international, especially European affairs.

CEE is also referred to as the economic "backyard" of Germany. Since the end of the Cold War, Germany has paid a lot for the economic development of the CEECs, because safeguarding the social and economic stability and developing the economic and trade relations with CEECs has always been an inevitable requirement for promoting economic integration, which is of great significance to Germany and the EU. After the drastic changes in Eastern Europe, Germany began to help the CEECs reshape their democratic and economic systems to meet the EU standards and Germany's philosophy of social market economy by providing development assistance. It soon became the biggest aid donor for the region, and CEE has gradually developed into an important market for Germany in Europe.

With the geographic advantage, strong economic strength and product competitiveness, Germany has established close economic ties with this region, and enjoys a unique development advantage there. Germany soon became the biggest beneficiary of the economic development in CEE.

From 1990 to 2017, the trade volume of German exports to the CEECs has increased from 20.2 billion marks to 155.7 billion euros by about 14 times, and the imports from 15.9 billion marks to 173.4 billion euros by about 20 times.ⁱⁱⁱ In the last decade, CEECs have experienced strong economic growth. Their overall trade volume increased every year, up to 2017, their export volume accounted for about sixty percent of Germany's, and import volume for two thirds of Germany's, and their import and export volume accounted for about forty percent of the EU's.^{iv}

The close economic relationship between Germany and the CEECs is also reflected in the investment field. In 2014, the stock of foreign direct investment (FDI) by Germany in 15 CEE countries (not counting Montenegro) was about €89.4 billion. German investment in the CEECs from 2010 to 2014 accounted for more than 9% of its total annual FDI. In the German investment rankings, Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary made the top 20, ranked 12, 13, 17 respectively.^v

Thus it can be said that CEE has become Germany's veritable political and economic "backyard", which has formed political and economic interdependency with Germany. So it's understandable that Germany paid great attention to CEECs, lest this "cheese" be moved by anyone else, and its protectionist tendency began to strengthen.

However, there are divergent interests between Germany and CEECs. Despite being the "second-class citizens" and the "secondary market" of the EU, their rebellious nationalism has made them unwilling to be completely subject to EU's leadership. The anti-EU tendency of Visegrad Group since the refugee crisis because of the divergence of core interests^{vi} and its unequivocal opposition to the "multi-speed Europe" plan really caused a headache for the EU. As the centrifugal trend in CEECs still exists, the suspicion and mistrust of Germany to CEECs is then inevitably, especially when a cooperative relationship with the world's second largest economy was established and tangible progress was made.

To sum up, for fear that the "16+1 Cooperation" may strengthen CEECs' economic independence from Germany and pose a potential threat to its interests in this region and its leading role in the EU, Germany began to point a finger at China's "16+1" initiative.

1.2 Germany's Worries about the Dilemma of European Integration

In theory, Germany has no reason to suspect that China's "16+1 Cooperation" will preempt its vested interests in CEE, because unlike Germany, China has neither the historical origins or long-term economic cooperation with the 16 CEECs, nor the complementarity of education and culture, and it has so far not touched on any vested interest of Germany in this area. Germany's suspicions do not root in "16+1" itself, but in the protectionist tendency towards its "backyard", as well as in the worsening of centrifugal tendency in the EU.

Germany pursues the interest-oriented foreign policy. The European policy is the foundation of German foreign policy, and European integration is the core goal and task of German European policy. However, in recent years, European integration has shown a

divided and regressive trend. Germany is so sensitive to the foreign affairs of the EU countries, that it deals with issues of national interests in contradiction with its status as Europe's biggest economy and shows excessive protectionist tendency.

However, the problem of European integration has never been an external problem, it roots in the EU. From the initial 6 countries of the Coal and Steel Community to the EU with 27 member states (after Brexit), the organization form relies mainly on "intergovernmentalism", while the "supranationalism" plays a subsidiary role.

According to "intergovernmentalism" of European integration theory, a national state and its government play a leading role in the process of European integration. According to Stanley Hoffman, the sole purpose of a state is to preserve itself. Cooperation among states is only a means of achieving this goal, namely, such cooperation is maintained only in the context of maintaining the strength, safety and economic interests of all countries.^{vii} This has spawned two fundamental contradictions within the EU system.

The first contradiction is EU's inefficiency in decision-making process. Since the Second World War and after decades of development and evolution, the EU has developed into an intergovernmental organization with a supranational nature. Obviously, the current EU is still neither European Federation nor United States of Europe, the legislative authority is always in the hands of its member states.^{viii} In other words, the EU is still the "confederation" rather than the "federation", the member states cooperate for the common interests, but retain most of their sovereignties. Because of the differences in their fundamental interests, political status, level of economic development, foreign policy and values, views on the goal of European integration, they bicker constantly over the European affairs, which leads to a delay in reaching agreement on favorable decisions. This is the structural problem of European integration, how far it can go, is so far hard to say.

Take the management of the refugee crisis as an example, the divergence of national interests led to the difficulty in reaching an agreement on refugee resettlement quotas. As a result, the centrifugal trend intensified, social contradictions rose to political contradictions, the populism in Europe and the right-wing populist party in Germany have been rising, which directly caused a decline in government stability after the German election 2017 and instability in the EU. In this context, Germany is much more anxious about the prospects for European integration than ever before.

The second contradiction is the parlous situation of democratic deficit. Another drawback of "intergovernmentalism" is that the decision right inclines to the great power in the battle for interests among the EU member states, which causes the "democratic deficit". Germany's economic strength is far beyond other member states and has an important influence on the EU decision-making process,^{ix} CEE remains the "secondary market" of the EU and the "backyard" of Germany, whose word does not carry much weight. Especially in the aftermath of the European debt crisis, countries that rely on Germany for their economic support have to accept Germany's austerity policy even if it's shackles to them. In the same way, the direction of CEECs' development is taken by Germany, they thus look for the way out, such as establishing economic and trade relations with emerging markets like China, which, however, was interpreted as "separatist tendency" by Germany and even the EU.

German ambassador Michael Clauss said that the “16+1 Cooperation”, as a regional cooperation parallel to the EU, has partly divided the EU. However, the split tendency in the EU occurred very early, it’s a long-standing abuse of the EU since established. Therefore, to blame it on the “16+1” initiative is farfetched.

Germany takes European integration as its core interest of foreign policy, with its strength, safety and economic interests as the precondition, and thought the cooperation between China and CEECs might encroach on its interests. That explains why the “16+1” initiative, based on the concepts of mutual benefit and reciprocity as well as win-win cooperation, which was proposed on the premise of support for the European integration, has been repeatedly obstructed by the German political elites, despite its beneficial nature of promoting economic development of CEECs. The thought of realistic “Zero-sum game” is therefrom evident, which reflects Germany’s anxiety and fear of the split trend of Europe.

Europe is going through a tough time in recent years. The overall economic weakness, eroding benefits, persistently high unemployment made the integration process arduous. After the European debt crisis, the gap between North and South deepens, while the Ukrainian crisis, the refugee crisis and terrorism-related incidents have increased the disputes between East and West. The two “Black Swan incidents”, i.e. Donald Trump’s election to the presidency and Brexit, have energized the European populist forces. Influenced by the trend of anti-globalization, the populism and nationalism, the conflicts among different social classes, ethnic groups and religious contradictions became increasingly fierce. After the elections in Europe in 2017, the traditional parties took a considerable hit, the EU “twin engines”, Germany and France, suffered from internal and external problems, which spawned a strong force of euroscepticism, thus the European “separatist tendency” intensified.

Just under such background, the fragile EU becomes sensitive and paranoid, so does the “EU’s Germany”. Once the CEECs no longer depend on Germany economically or reduce their reliance on the Eurozone, the sensitive Germany would probably worry that the attractiveness and cohesion of integration might be weakened. Therefore, faced with the world’s second largest economy, for whatever purpose, China’s willingness to cooperate would trigger Germany’s vigilance, who even distort China’s intention. This suspicion was not caused by any country, but by Germany’s diffidence of the current development of European integration.

It can be said that the “16+1 Cooperation” is actually the “scapegoat” of the underdevelopment of the European integration. Whether in view of its motive, goal or approaches, there is no trace of “splitting Europe”, nor has it broken the framework of the EU. Germany’s excessive vigilance is a result of international and domestic environmental effects.

2. Germany’s Impact on the EU’s China Policy

The European policy is the most important part of German foreign policy, and the attitude of Germany has important influence on EU’s policy towards China.

The “Power Audit of EU-China Relations” (2007) reflected the disagreement among European countries on China policy. “The 27 EU countries have different opinions on two major issues: how to deal with China’s impact on European economy and how to deal with

China politically.^x This could be due to their different considerations: Germany cares about stabilizing the Eurozone, while CEECs welcome new cooperation to develop their economy. However, in consideration of the leading role and economic strength in the EU, Germany's influence on the EU's China policy is greater than CEECs.

The leading role of Germany in the EU is also confirmed by the views of John Fox and François Godement. They divided the EU members into four categories: "authoritarian entrepreneurs", "fancied free traders", "sophisticated mercantilists", and "EU followers". They think that Germany clearly belongs to the first category.^{xi} Of course, such assessment is somewhat too absolute, but it does reflect a indisputable fact: The word "authoritarian entrepreneur" has the following implications: Firstly, the status of Germany is very high within the EU. Secondly, the EU is affected by Germany in decision-making. Thirdly, the core consideration of Germany in the decision-making process is its national interest.

As far as the cooperation is concerned, the "threat" of China is not that big. "Although these voices seem to suggest that the role of the Western Europe in CEE is declining and China's is growing, the reality is that Chinese economic presence in the region is minimal from the perspective of both FDI and CEE exports, and little has changed in these regards since the founding of the 16+1 platform."^{xii} That means, China has not caused a significant change in the economic structure in Europe so far. Even in the Czech Republic, China's direct investment is far less than other major investment countries.

This initiative is based on the standpoint of supporting European integration and provides CEE with more diversified and complementary trade channels, sources of investment and financing channels, which are beneficial to European economic development. In that case, the doubts or even rejections expressed by the EU leader, Germany, can only be explained by its logic of Zero-sum game in terms of national interests.

Germany has demonstrated distinct egoism in its policy toward CEECs and China. On the one hand, Germany is committed to reshaping the economic systems of the CEECs, not aiming at helping these countries promote economic growth selflessly, but intending to make them comply with the EU standards and come near to Germany's social market economy system. So the new economic development paths and external financing sources outside the Eurozone mean touching its interests in the view of Germany. Therefore, Germany cast "doubts" on this initiative and called for the EU to boycott it.

In the policy towards CEE, the EU and Germany always speak with one voice. During the transition period in CEE, the EU provided support for their economic transformation and transition to democracy. In the same way, Germany gave great impetus to the economic and trade relations with them and also provided assistance. Besides, Germany and the EU stay in step with each other in "16+1 Cooperation". Germany sang a rebellious tone and called on the EU to develop a unified China policy to counter the "threat", accordingly, in "China at the gates: A new power audit of EU-China relations" 2017, the European Commission for Foreign Relations clearly posited suspicions about China's "16+1" initiative based on Western values and thought that China intended to divide and conquer the EU.^{xiii}

It can be concluded that Germany's doubts about "16+1 Cooperation" greatly affect the EU's policy toward China, and the EU's China policy limits the development of "16+1

Cooperation” with its rules. Based on the above analysis, it is necessary for China to analyze the cases rationally, draw on advantages and avoid disadvantages, only in this way can China find a solution to resolve these doubts.

3. China’s Countermeasures

In order to find a solution, we must first clarify that the crux of Germany’s suspicions about “16+1” lies in interests of Germany and achievements of European integration. Firstly, Germany is anxious about whether the initiative has an impact on Germany’s vested interests in CEE, thus affecting its dominant Status in the EU. Secondly, it worries about whether this cooperation will worsen the centrifugal trends within Europe and cause a regression of integration.

From the foregoing analysis we can see that the essence of Germany’s doubts is an excessive reaction to the current dilemma internally and externally. This initiative was misunderstood, which doesn’t mean the motive to “divide and rule Europe”. It reflects that the connotation of the initiative has not been understood by German political circles and academia. Therefore, the first countermeasure is to intensify the efforts to illustrate the motive, intention, essence, and prospect of the “16+1” initiative comprehensively and in depth, to avoid misinterpretation due to deficient communication.

Since Germany is not included in the “16+1 Cooperation” that touches upon Germany’s “backyard”, it’s bound to raise doubts from the perspective of national interests. Therefore, the second measure is to introduce Germany into “16+1 Cooperation” and allow it to participate in and supervise the process, so that Germany’s concerns can be soothed through transparency of the cooperation between China and the CEECs.

Cooperation remains the main theme and general direction of Sino-German relations. It is only because “16+1” allows foreign countries to enter Germany’s “backyard” in Europe, that the conflicts of interest should be smoothed by some reassurance and compensation. Therefore, the third countermeasure is to effectively promote the in-depth connection of “Made in China 2025” strategic plan and Germany’s “Industry 4.0”, to provide more favorable framework conditions and policy supports as well as concrete projects to Germany.

The sense of insecurity in the EU and Germany also comes from the situation of internal and external dilemma, which has much to do with the European debt crisis, the Ukrainian crisis, the refugee crisis and other international crises that came one after another. As a result, the EU is facing ideological trends as populism, nationalism and anti-globalization. Therefore, the fourth countermeasure is to strengthen the cooperation with Germany on crisis management and international issues.

“The current development of Sino-German communication and cooperation is far beyond any period in history.” This is the high evaluation of Sino-German relations during the meeting between President Xi Jinping and then President Gauck in 2016. Both Presidents unanimously agreed to consolidate and strengthen the all-round strategic partnership between China and Germany. For that reason, we can believe that Germany’s doubts about “16+1 Cooperation” could be allayed.

4. Conclusion

Based on the theory of intergovernmentalism and Zero-sum game as well as empirical analysis of international relations among China, Germany, CEE and the EU, the causes of Germany's suspicions about the "16+1 Cooperation" are digged out from the perspective of national interests and European integration, and countermeasures for China are concluded.

First, the reasons why the "16+1" initiative has raised Germany's doubts are, on the one hand, that Germany thinks that its vested interests in the economic and trade exchanges in CEE might be affected, which in turn affects Germany's leading role in the EU. On the other hand, out of concerns about Europe, the achievements of European integration might be weakened.

Second, Germany cannot get rid of the logic of realistic Zero-sum game. After Brexit Germany's dominant status in the EU is further enhanced and it hopes to rely on the EU to occupy a fitting place in the world. Since the CEE region plays an important geo-strategic role and is an important "backyard" of Germany's political and economic interests, it's inevitable that Germany sees the success of the "16+1 Cooperation" as a detriment to its national interests. In other words, from the one-sided interpretation of "16+1 Cooperation", we can see that Germany cannot get rid of the logic of zero-sum game out of self-protection.

Third, the outcome of European integration is still a "confederation" rather than "federation". In recent years, the EU has a hard time inside and outside, and the European integration still has a long way to go. As the biggest supporter and promoter of European integration, Germany has a great influence on the EU's policy towards China. Germany's attitude toward China's "16+1" initiative based on the "purpose of self-preservation" shows that the intergovernmentalism goes beyond supranationalism within the EU, which proves that Germany is not confident in the outcome of European integration.

Fourth, the close relationship between Germany and CEECs seems to be Germany's "wishful thinking". The CEECs have historically been Germany's "destined space" and have important geopolitical implications for Europe and Germany. Germany has strongly promoted the accession process of some CEE countries, and both sides are interdependent with each other in economic and trade exchanges in recent decades. Besides, the trade volume of CEECs has occupied a large proportion of the total trade in the EU, they are thus considered by Germany as its political and economic "backyard". However, the CEECs, especially the Visegrad countries, are reluctant to be European second-class citizens, they openly oppose to the viewpoint of Germany in EU affairs, and become hindrance to Germany in promoting European integration. Therefore, whether in supporting and assisting the economic and democratic transition of CEECs in the past, or trying to intervene in the economic cooperation between CEECs and China, it seems to be Germany's "wishful thinking".

Fifth, there are ways to allay Germany's suspicions about "16+1" initiative. Since China's "16+1" initiative is essentially a plan that contributes to European economy, the key to solve the problem lies only on how to let Europe, especially Germany, know and understand the intention and essence of this initiative. Besides, by allowing Germany to participate in and supervise the process, China could eliminate its doubts. Finally, by using the opportunity to connect "Made in China 2025" to Germany's "Industry 4.0", a win-win

situation might be achieved and Germany's suspicions about the impact on its interests could also be eliminated.

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