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[Column] How a mature democracy formulates its security strategy

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Lessons for South Korea in the German approach to ties with China



Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany (center) appears at a press conference with members of the country's coalition government (left to right), Finance Minister Christian Lindner, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, and Interior and Community Minister Nancy Faeser after the release of Germany's national security strategy document on June 14. (Reuters/Yonhap)



By Moon Chung-in, Yonsei University professor emeritus

Last week, I visited Germany at the invitation of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The five members of the delegation — two representatives from ASEAN countries, one from India, one from Pakistan, and me — had the chance to join focused discussions with a variety of figures including political leaders, high-ranking officials in the areas of foreign policy and national security, think tank researchers, and members of the press. The topic was Germany's strategy on China.

We tend to think of Germany as being a logical, methodical and meticulous country, but these discussions turned out to be quite chaotic. I noticed varying perceptions of China even among members of Germany's leadership as well as major differences in their desired approach.

Those differences were also evident in the German government's first report on its national security strategy, which was published on June 15. That report defines China as playing three roles: partner, competitor and systemic rival. But groups that are friendly to China have a strong tendency to treat China as a partner, neutral groups tend to see it as a competitor, and hostile groups regard it as a systemic rival.

Even more interesting is the fact that the German government has decided to adopt a separate report in the future because the current one failed to arrive at a concrete strategy for China. That suggests that reaching a political consensus on the China issue won't be any easier for

Germany than it is for Korea.

First, let's look at Germany's economic policy on China. Germany seems to have written off some aspects of the US' strategy of "decoupling," which is aimed at removing China from capitalism's international division of labor. But Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who is head of the Greens (which is in coalition with the ruling Social Democratic Party), strongly prefers a policy of "de-risking" with China because of human rights issues. De-risking, which means moving away from China in risky areas of the economy, doesn't seem to be that different from decoupling.

In contrast, Prime Minister Olaf Scholz and other doves in the Social Democratic Party have proposed the alternative of "diversification." They think that Germany should maintain its current trade with and investment in China while gradually diversifying to reduce dependence on the country.

The Free Democratic Party, the third partner in the coalition government, and Germany's business leaders advocate maintaining investment in and trade with China according to the principle of keeping political and economic matters separate. They don't regard Germany's economic ties with China as presenting a major risk because Germany's exports only account for 35% of gross domestic product, with 65% of those exports bound for Europe and only 10% to China.

Germany also exemplifies the conflict between foreign policy focused on values and foreign policy focused on the national interest vis-à-vis China.

Opinions in Germany are split on whether NATO should expand its activities to counter China. Bureaucrats in Germany's Federal Foreign Office and Defense Ministry and pro-NATO members of the Bundestag called for acceding to American wishes to become military partners in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Those figures say that Germany cannot afford to be a bystander on the South China Sea, sea lane security and the Taiwan Strait crisis.

But such ideas are viewed quite skeptically by the pragmatists and the successors of Willy Brandt's doctrine of Ostpolitik who make up the bulk of the Social Democrats. They retort that Germany isn't strong enough to project power into the Indo-Pacific region because of its limited capabilities and will.

The Germans I spoke to were unanimous in their position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They said the invasion was a serious violation of international law and of Ukraine's territory and sovereignty, that it must be firmly countered as a major threat to the peace and security of Europe, and that Ukraine should be provided full and unstinting support.

But German leaders were split on the role that China should play in that conflict. Figures from the Christian Democratic Union and the Greens were skeptical about China's 12-point peace plan because it made no mention of territory, but some members of the Social Democrats had a different take. They said that China's plan should be handled cautiously since rejecting it out of hand could have serious repercussions. They were concerned, for example, that such a rejection could set the stage for China joining the Russian camp.

Opinions also varied on what should be done about the "zeitenwende" (turning point in history) represented by the invasion of Ukraine, climate change, and the confrontation between the US and China.

Germany is home to multiple groups, each with their own unique perspective. There are hard-liners who emphasize NATO and human rights, moderates who prefer peace and détente and advocate multilateralism and the idea of "Wandel durch Handel" (bringing change through trade), and Europhiles who are strong advocates of the EU.

What's surprising is that amidst this multiplicity of shifting opinions, German leaders are patiently working to build a political consensus.

And that's where Scholz's prudent yet pragmatic leadership really shines. He draws upon wisdom and experience to humbly incorporate the opinions of various political groups into Germany's national security and foreign policy, reaching compromises where necessary, and all while speaking his mind to China.

That would seem to constitute mature democracy in its true form. It also has a number of implications for Koreans as we handle the same issue in a completely different way.

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