

## **Post Merkel – 2021 German elections part 2**

### **Economic dependence – German China policy at a crossroads**

“If you look at the nice statements that the chancellor office has been doing about human rights, it’s only words. You cannot measure anything concretely.”

Two days before the German federal elections, Haiyuer Kuerban (38), head of the Berlin office of international organisation the World Uyghur Congress, lets out a sigh. The Congress fights to secure the human rights of the Uyghur ethnic minority in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region where China is believed to be continuing to commit human rights abuses. German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s foreign policy stance towards China has felt as if she is closing her eyes towards human rights issues.

Kuerban was raised in Xinjiang and did not have any opportunity to study Uyghur history at school, instead being taught the history of the Chinese Communist Party. The Uyghur language was forbidden in his university classes. Communist Party employees kept a lookout and professors using the language would disappear from the campus. He realised how oppressed the Uyghur people were through coverage in Germany where he moved to following graduation. He started to participate in human rights protection activities but five years ago stopped receiving contact from within Xinjiang. Afterwards, they heard that many Uyghurs had been placed in internment camps.

Chancellor Merkel has been praised for her diplomacy, however there is deep rooted criticism that she has been biased in favour of China. In her 16 year term she has made as many as 12 visits to China. In 2007, two years after she assumed office, she became the first German Chancellor to meet with the Dalai Lama, the foremost spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, which among other instances, showed a fairly strong stance of resistance towards China. However, she is believed to have changed with the event of the global financial crisis the following year in 2008.

Industries in Germany, such as the automotive industry which is the backbone of the economy, have increased their economic dependence on China, and trade between Germany and China last year was worth over €200 billion, more than 3 times the value of 15 years ago. At the end of last year, when international criticisms of human rights abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang were growing stronger, Chancellor Merkel was putting a lot of effort into the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Kuerban criticises this. “It shows what Chancellor Merkel stands for - which is business.”

The Chinese acquisition of a continuing number of German companies has increased the dissatisfaction of Germans with their country’s foreign policy towards China. According to a survey from August in a German magazine, approximately 60% of Germans answered that “Germany should take a tougher stance towards China even if there are negative consequences for economic relations.” Even Chancellor Merkel had been beginning to harden her stance, for example by increasing Germany’s involvement in the Indo-Pacific region similarly to other Western countries, but the response to China will be one of the main issues her successor as chancellor will need to address.

### **Questions over human rights infringements and the acquisition of German companies**

According to German media, both the Social Democratic Party (SDP) which reclaimed first place in the recent election and the second place Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU/CSU), which is also aiming to lead a coalition government, acknowledge the threat that China poses but

emphasise “dialogue”. On the other hand, the Greens, which have made rapid progress into third place, do not appear about to give up on sanctions.

If the Greens are part of a coalition government, there is a chance that the policy towards China will be toughened but Dr Stefan Wurster, Professor for Policy Analysis at the Technical University Munich says that “In Germany this export economy is still important and there will be no very strict answers to these countries because we do not want to negatively affect our export economy.” He points out that the new administration will have a difficult time finding the balance between this approach and the more proactive approach of the US under Biden.

There are between 2,000-3,000 Uyghurs living in Germany. While Kuerban is grateful for Merkel’s efforts to support Uyghers to live in the country, he is hoping for firmer measures from the next administration, such as measures to prevent the sale of goods produced with forced labour. “What’s going on against the Uyghurs requires a much tougher, more resolute reaction.”

By Yuya Fujisawa, in Berlin

### **Picture captions**

Top: Chancellor Merkel visiting China in September 2019 and shaking hands with Xi Jinping

Bottom: Haiyuer Kuerban explains his views on Germany’s policy towards China at the Berlin office of the World Uyghur Congress on the 24th.