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RESPONSE TO BOOK REVIEW

Germany and China: How Entanglement Undermines Freedom, Prosperity and Security by Andreas Fulda.

By Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik

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After receiving thoughtful praise by James Kynge in the *Financial Times*, Heiner Roetz in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Stefan Messingschlager in *SIRIUS*, and Hanns W. Maull in *Survival*, as well as Martin Šebeňa and Rowan Callick in a highly appreciative book symposium in *Asian Perspective*, to name just a few, my new monograph *Germany and China: How Entanglement Undermines Freedom, Prosperity and Security* (Fulda, 2024a) faced an outlier in Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's sharply negative review in *JEACS* (2025). As an advocate of academic freedom, I welcome robust critique. Yet I would like to challenge misrepresentations that distort the book's arguments and intent. This reply addresses her key inaccuracies, from my stance on decoupling to the book's scholarly rigour.

The reviewer claims I advocate that “de-coupling from China is the right decision” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2025 p.160) for Germany and the EU. This misrepresents my core argument. In fact, my main proposition is that the German state and society need to manage geopolitical and geoeconomic risks better. In Chapter 11 I explicitly argue *against* hard decoupling: “Disentanglement does not mean cutting the proverbial Gordian knot in half. Hard decoupling would almost certainly incur very high costs. While a careful disentangling of German key stakeholders from autocratic China will also incur short-term costs, the upside of disentanglement would be the restoring of organizational and strategic autonomy, both preconditions for the protection of Germany's national sovereignty” (Fulda, 2024, p. 214). I argue that Germany must first engage in risk assessment regarding China. On this basis measures have to be developed within a strategy of defending Germany's democratic sovereignty. As the main political risk is the autocratic nature of the Chinese party-state, developing autocracy competency (Fulda, 2023) is essential.

In her opening paragraph she also uses a false dichotomy by claiming that “Fulda's intervention only deepens the divide between the ‘China Versteher’ ... and those who criticise China” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2025, p.160). In Chapter 5 I caution against such a false choice: “While the German China debate is often viewed as deeply entrenched, it is actually a public dispute between two perfectly legitimate political positions. Neither side advocates extreme viewpoints, for example, arguing that Germany should become a vassal state of China (Extreme pole 1) or advocating hard decoupling (Extreme pole 2). It is also entirely possible that discourse participants neither fully identify with the old or the emergent paradigm. Figure 2 does not represent an either/or situation but should be seen as a continuum, where in-between positions in the public debate are both possible and desirable” (Fulda, 2024, p.98–99).

In her second paragraph, the reviewer vaguely refers to the book's “theoretical framework” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2025, p.16) — never naming it — before claiming I did not use it as a “guide to analysis” (ibid) and questioning the work's academic rigour. This misrepresents my research design. I employ Baumgartner and Jones' *Punctuated Equilibrium Theory* (Fulda, 2024, pp. 91–94) to analyse shifts in public policy, integrated with a detailed research design

(ibid, pp. 94–99) and a section on my positionality as pracademic (ibid, pp. 11–13) – elements she ignores. By sidestepping these, she implies a theoretical void where a solid scholarly foundation exists. This undermines her own critique’s credibility.

The reviewer also asserts I fail to take “potential counter-narratives seriously enough to decipher the inherent logic of what decision-makers at the time had to consider” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2025, p.160), an unsubstantiated claim that misrepresents my work. In Chapter 5 I address hindsight bias explicitly. I refer to the scholarship of German historian Reinhart Koselleck who “reminds us that actors decide based on their ‘space of experience’ and ‘horizon of expectation’” (Fulda, 2024, p. 97). I also apply his insight to Merkel’s 2022 Lisbon defence of Germany’s Russia and energy policy. When asked by journalists at a press conference whether she had misread Putin’s intentions prior to the all-out war against Ukraine she stated that “you always act in the time in which one is” (ibid, p.82). I criticise Merkel for reframing the decade-long mantra “change through trade” to “connection through trade”. Far from neglecting context, I dissect it.

Weigelin-Schwiedrzik further claims I have misunderstood Germany’s *Ostpolitik*. My analysis is informed by historians such as Behrends and Winkler – hardly ideologues, given their SPD leanings – who have thoroughly critiqued the legacy of *Ostpolitik*. They stress that the first phase of *Ostpolitik*, prior to the OSCE-Helsinki Conference of 1975, was rather successful, before it slid into an overly accommodating approach towards the Soviet Union in the early 1980s. Ironically, her take mythologises it, contrary to broad academic counter-evidence. She claims that “(from) today’s perspective, Germany’s Ostpolitik was successful as it made Germany’s re-unification possible and contributed to ending the Cold War”, overlooking the fact that such takes on *Ostpolitik* reduce the historical complexity too much. Such a reduction in complexity also encourages confirmation bias, whereby narratives that fit into one’s own world view are adopted uncritically. The reviewer speculates that the supposed success of *Ostpolitik* “might have caused German decision-makers not to question the validity of their policy. The same is true for the dissolution of the USSR which seemed to have proven the feasibility of regime change in Communist countries.” In my book I directly challenge attempts to mythologise *Ostpolitik*, with reference to Bingener and Wehner. They criticise the tendency among ardent supporters of *Ostpolitik* to disallow any critique of it as “an attack on the party’s holy of holies” (Fulda, 2024, p. 28). Her defence of Germany’s *Ostpolitik* thus distorts my evidence-based nuance.

Near the end of the review, the reviewer suggests that I aim to “convince China Studies to a consensus on dealing with China” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2025, p.164). In Chapter 5 I clarify that “this book does not propose a paradigm to be blindly followed” but seeks “greater reflexivity” (Fulda, 2024, p. 96). Paradigm shifts are not simply the outcome of thesis and antithesis. Instead cognitive change is an iterative process, which often constructs a new paradigm by transforming and reframing or preserving some former insights.

Her insinuation that the focus of inquiry in my research recalls an approach that “has its historical roots in the very beginning of China Studies with the Institut für Orientalische Sprachen acting as a training centre for colonial officers deployed in China” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2025, p.164). is a misrepresentation which aims to morally discredit my scholarship. How can one misqualify a defence of German democratic sovereignty as a neo-colonial attitude?

Lastly, she alleges I give an insufficient explanation of “strategic culture” (ibid). This criticism distorts the book’s analytical approach. My diagnosis that Germany lacks a realistic and reflexive strategic culture is a necessary starting point to reframe Germany’s China policy. When discussing Germany’s strategic culture under Merkel (Fulda, 2024, pp. 20–22), I cite Giegerich and Jonas, who have distinguished between “the level of ambition in international security policy”, ‘the scope of action for the executive in decision-making’, ‘foreign policy orientation’ and ‘the willingness to use military force’”. I also extensively discuss China’s strategic culture under the CCP (ibid, pp. 38–41).

Weigelin-Schwiedrzik’s review misrepresents key arguments I put forward in *Germany and China*. While I do not suppose that such misrepresentations are intentional, I would still like to raise the question of what the reasons for these unintended distortions could be. I have found the scholarship of Robert Jervis (1976) eye-opening in this regard. In his view our emotionally grounded belief system steers many of our perceptions and interpretations of past and present events.

I consider it possible that underlying axioms informing my book’s analysis are perceived by the reviewer as questioning some of her own key assumptions, e.g. her belief that CCP-led China is keen to pursue a “middle” position of a “responsible great power” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 2023, 23). In a TV show she also stated that “realistically there is no country in the world other than China that can convince Russia that it must come to the negotiating table” (@talkimhangar7, 2023).

In stark contrast, I consider the Chinese Communist Party — with its diplomatic, economic, and military support for Russia — a revisionist power which poses a threat to European security (Fulda, 2024b). This is just one example of how openly declared (and sometimes hidden) assumptions about the nature of China’s autocratic regime inform our scholarship and can be at odds with each other. This is why, in the introductory chapter, I created transparency about my positionality (Fulda, 2024, pp. 11–13). I would like to encourage colleagues to enhance transparency by explicitly articulating their paradigmatic choices, fostering a more reflexive and open scholarly dialogue.

We could all benefit from an open-ended discussion about whether or not there are explicit or implicit paradigms operating in the field. This is a topic we addressed in our panel “Spotlight: Challenging unspoken assumptions in Contemporary China Studies” during the EACS

Conference in Tallinn in August 2024 (EACS 2024 Biennial Conference). I see my author's reply as a contribution to this ongoing academic debate and would like to thank *JEACS* for this chance to correct the record. Moving forward, I hope that even in heated disagreement, we can uphold a dialogue free of misrepresentations – agreeing to disagree without being disagreeable.

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