

The Rise of Asia

A representative survey of the German public commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, October 2012

Germans look at Asia with a combination of admiration, respect and concern regarding their own future. Whereas Europe remains mired in crisis, the economic giant China is increasingly perceived as a world power. Germans also believe India is on its way to becoming a global leader, though it lags behind China considerably. The importance of Japan, once a leading economic power, appears to be diminishing in the eyes of the Germans, in particular since the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe.

Just a few weeks before China's ruling Communist Party determines the country's new leadership, which is bound to shape the future of Asia's development, the polling firm TNS Emnid has conducted a representative survey in Germany commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung on the perceived impact of Asia's economic and political rise to power.

Overall, the majority of Germans view the development of Asia as having positive effects for Germany, although skepticism regarding the effects on the labor market predominate. Fifty percent of Germans polled believe Asia's economic rise presents opportunities for Germany. Thirty nine percent see Asia's rise rather as a threat. There is, however, considerable more confidence expressed that Germany will be able to meet the economic and political challenges associated with growing Asian powers, with four out of five citizens expressing optimism on this point. Only 15 percent fear that Germany will not prove able to meet the challenges ahead.

This confidence apparently derives from the strong trust placed in Germany's technological superiority vis à vis Asia. Seventy one percent of Germans polled are either certain or fairly certain that Germany will continue to lead in research and technology, "even in the long run." However, the majority of those polled believe Asia's economic miracle will have a negative impact on Germany's labor market. Forty-two percent of Germans polled fear that Asia's rise will lead to job losses in Germany. Only 25 percent believe that developments in Asia will bring additional jobs to Germany. Opportunities for first-time job seekers are also viewed with skepticism, despite the demographics of aging in Germany which is diminishing the labor supply. A clear majority of Germans (57 percent) believe young people in Asia will have better career opportunities than their counterparts in Europe.

Germans are skeptical of social and political developments in Asia. A majority of those polled do not believe social conditions and political participation will improve in Asia, despite booming economic growth. A near two-thirds of those polled consider it unlikely or even out of the question that governments in Asia will seek to improve social equality and social safeguards. Almost the same number of those polled express doubts that Asia's economic growth will lead to a more just distribution of global wealth in the long run: 51 percent of those polled consider this unlikely; 12 percent are certain this will not happen. A majority of Germans polled (52%) are also skeptical that growing prosperity in Asia will lead to increasing democratization. Germans are even more skeptical that growing prosperity in Asia will lead to environmental and climate protection standards on par with those found in Germany. When it comes to environmental and climate protection issues, four out of five German citizens believe that Germans and Europeans will need to do more in the long run than emerging nations in Asia.

Germans identify cooperation as the political answer to developments in Asia. Thirty seven percent of those polled would like to see closer cooperation take place. Only 18 percent think Germany should pursue its interests more aggressively and follow the example of the United States. A relative majority of 41 percent believe Germany is on the right track politically in this regard and that it should continue on its current course. Most Germans appear to agree with the German government's strategy of cooperation with China in particular.

For Germans, China is clearly the most important country in Asia, ahead of Japa and India. This applies to its importance as a sales market and economic competitor, but also its perceived relevance as a political partner. Sixty-two percent of Germans polled assess the political importance of communist and autocratic China as a German partner to be "very" or "somewhat" important. Only 59 percent consider democratic Japan to be very or somewhat important as a political partner and only 35 percent consider this to be the case with India. China also ranks highest in terms of its capacity to save debt-ridden euro states. Forty-four percent of Germans polled see China as a powerful investor in the fight against the euro crisis, whereas only 30 percent believe this to be true of Japan and only 15 percent of India.

Germans nonetheless see China more as a threatening rival than partner, at least in terms of economic matters. Seventy-three percent of those polled see the People's Republic as a competitor in the consumption of raw materials and energy, and 72 percent see it as a competitor in developing new, innovative products. China's importance as a market for German products is ranked third here, with 69 percent of Germans polled identifying it as "very important" or "somewhat important."

Japan holds considerably less relevance for Germany. Germans consider Japan more important than China only in terms of its role as a partner in the fight against climate change. As a competitor in developing new, innovative products, Japan – once admired and feared for its innovative capacity – is now perceived as being nearly on par with the Chinese.

Germans attribute even less importance to India. The country's importance for Germany was rated below that of Japan and China on every question posed.