Virtual Event | A New Era for Europe? A Conversation with Reinhard Bütikofer

TRANSCRIPT

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• Reinhard Bütikofer, German Member of the European Parliament and Vice-Chair of the European Greens/Free Alliance Party
• Kenneth R. Weinstein, Walter P. Stern Distinguished Fellow, Hudson Institute

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2096-virtual-event-a-new-era-for-europe-a-conversation-with-reinhard-b-tikofer42022

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Ken Weinstein:
I'm Ken Weinstein, the Walter P. Stern distinguished fellow at Hudson Institute. And I'm honored, and I don't say that lightly, to welcome Reinhard Bütikofer, who's a German member of the European Parliament and vice chair of the European Greens Free Alliance Party, for a discussion here at Hudson Institute on Europe's emerging foreign and defense policy in the aftermath of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Now, Mr. Bütikofer, who chairs the European Parliamentary Delegation for Relations With China, is a longtime critic of Germany's "Ostpolitik," a noted champion of human rights, arguably the lead champion of human rights in the European Parliament. He was sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party, a badge of honor, in 2021, in part because of his passionate defense of the repressed Uyghur minority in China. He was formerly co-chair of the German Green Party, and he's been in the European Parliament now since 2009.

Mr. Bütikofer, it's really an honor, as I said, to welcome you to Hudson Institute. I want to get a sense, for our audience, of your take on the changes in European foreign and defense policy, and also the changes inside Germany since the invasion, and particularly from you, who was such a critic of Angela Merkel, of Chancellor Merkel's engagement with both Russia and China.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
Well, thank you, first of all, Ken, for having me, and thanks for your kind introduction. Indeed, I would say that Putin's unlawful, brutal invasion of Ukraine has become a historical turning point in Germany's and the EU's foreign and defense policy. In Germany, it's been called a [foreign language 00:02:03]. That's a very momentous term, meaning we're new finding ourselves in a new age, kind of.

And let me first talk about the European level because that's less often acknowledged. But for so many years, even decades, a lot of people around Europe have complained that Europe will never have a coherent, effective foreign policy or defense policy because of the unanimity rule between the 27 member states. In this case, the European Union managed to act decisively, very fast, and very powerfully to counter Russia's aggression, imposing extremely strict sanctions, and also facilitating the support of Ukraine with arms by providing financing for that from the European coffers. So I would say that this has been an hour where the European Union, in a way, started asserting itself, of necessity... not of choice, but of necessity... as a geopolitical actor.

And I want to add to that I feel that this has been very well coordinated also with our British friends and also with the U.S. government and friends around the globe. It's interesting to see that it's not just the old West that cooperates here. It's also countries like Japan. Even Singapore imposed sanctions. They haven't done that since, I think, '78. So clearly the European Union has been part of a very broad coalition, but it did bring its own weight to the table. And the Biden administration managed that effectively. I have been a critic of how they ran the withdrawal from Afghanistan, or how they managed AUKUS, but in this regard, it has been what could be described as partnership in leadership. So that's very positive.

On the German level, there has been a major turnaround. I don't think you can call it other than that. We have had a longstanding, deeply entrenched national policy that was supported by all the parties, from the conservative and the progressive camp, that Germany would not supply arms into a burning conflict. And under the impression of Russia's aggression and of Ukraine's need, we did a 180-degree turnaround and are now, after the United States, the second largest arms supplier to Ukraine, and still building up. We also have turned around our defense stature. Germany had not been willing, for quite a number of years, to officially pledge to uphold and fulfill the NATO goal of 2% of GDP for defense. In a very remarkable speech in the Bundestag on a Sunday, the chancellor reversed that. He promised that Germany would spend regularly 2% plus on defense. In addition to that, he also promised to catch up
with what had been left wanting, by creating an extra fund of a hundred billion for security-related investment.

So that has been a real turnaround. At the beginning, there was a lot of hesitancy, and when it came about, it found strong support from the German public.

Ken Weinstein:
Let's first turn to Germany. So you, and the Greens, and Foreign Minister Baerbock, as you look at the coalition government in Germany in particular, look at... Going into the election in which the Schultz government came to power, there were major differences on foreign policy in particular between the Greens and the SPD. And the Greens were certainly more critical on China, certainly more critical on Russia than the SPD was, going into the government. Even going into the Ukraine crisis, there were differences in tone.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
Not only in tone, also in substance. Our leading candidate, our candidate for the chancellor's office, Annalena Baerbock, who's now the foreign minister, made news in the campaign when she went beyond the perennial insistence on dialogue, dialogue, dialogue, and said, "We have to have dialogue and toughness." That in itself should not have been news, but it was. And she stood out as a critic of Putin in the campaign. I recall a TV debate where both the Social Democratic and the Christian Democratic candidate would argue that Nord Stream 2 was not a geopolitical problem, that it was just a commercial effort. We've never believed that, and it's never been true. And we've fought against that for so many years, often very lonely. Now Nord Stream 2 has been killed.

I would say that the turnaround that you see was not just facilitated by us. We gave expression to a reorientation that was gaining ground in society. When we negotiated the coalition contract, which is basically the foundational document for the government, we found support with Free Democrats, the liberal in the European sense of liberal, the business-oriented Free Democrats, in insisting on the relevancy of human rights. We had tough negotiations about language on Russia, language on China, but we succeeded in opening a new path. You can compare the language that the Merkel governments had spoken on those issues, dealing with those authoritarian, I would say totalitarian, challenges. And there's a complete change of track, which, of course, still has to be implemented. When we got there after Putin's aggression, we saw that implementation is much more difficult than just agreeing on language. But I think the trajectory is a new one now, and that also has a lot of support in society, a lot of support in the business community. That's very interesting.

Ken Weinstein:
First, in the policy community what's interesting to me about Germany was, as you mentioned earlier, the almost unanimity... And I'm paraphrasing and changing the context a little... in terms of the strategic community, how much of the strategic community mindset was engage, engage, engage, that this was the way to... with both Russia and China, that this was critical. And things have sort of flipped, first with regard to Russia. And are we also seeing a focus now on... a new focus, or a new focus on China, which you have a loud, and vocal, and forthright critic of?

Reinhard Bütikofer:
Well, I think it has to be said that in the think tank community, quite a few distinct voices had been prodding the government to change track for years now from DGAP, from ECFR-
Ken Weinstein:

GPPi?

Reinhard Büttikofer:

GPPi. Thorsten Benner is a very clear voice there, a real leader, but they didn't find enough resonance in the policy-making circles. And an argument that I encountered quite often when trying to push in that direction was, "Look, why are you so concerned with our dependency on Russia? It's a mutual dependency. We are dependent on their gas, on their oil. They're dependent on our money. Remember, during the heyday of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had always been a reliable supplier of gas. Where's the problem?" And what these people didn't understand, I think, was... And that was a lot of Social Democrats in particular. I don't want to be overly critical of our partner now, but it's just a historic truth.

Ken Weinstein:

Sure.

Reinhard Büttikofer:

They didn't understand that the Soviet Union, in its day, was a status quo power, whereas Putin's Russia is a revisionist power, and that has sort of now been made more than obvious by his actions. And I think that resonated a lot in Germany. He did not only threaten the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine. In his public communication, he laid it out very clearly that he was challenging the fundamental principles of Europe's security order, the principle that was already enshrined in Helsinki in 1975, that every country was allowed to choose its own alliances, the principle that countries could join NATO or EU if they wanted. He challenged all that. He's challenged the status quo to the degree of demanding, in practical terms, that Russia should be granted security superiority. These are all the countries that used to belong to the Warsaw Pact, plus Sweden, Austria, Finland, and probably others. So in a way, people started understanding that this was not just about Ukraine. This was about Europe, and Ukraine was fighting for Europe.

Ken Weinstein:

Yeah, it's fascinating when you think about Putin's behavior versus, at the height of Ostpolitik, the last few Soviet leaders, yeah, just how incredibly different his behavior is compared to, say, a Brezhnev, or let alone a Gorbachev, particularly in Europe. It's quite striking. Let me [crosstalk 00:14:39]-

Reinhard Büttikofer:

Also internally.

Ken Weinstein:

Yeah.

Reinhard Büttikofer:

I mean, there's more Stalinism in Russia today than there was in the day of Gorbachev.

Ken Weinstein:

Yes. No, it's quite striking. Let me ask you about former German leader Merkel. One of the interesting things we would notice here at Hudson, and our friends in Washington would, or we'd go to... we're in
Munich or we're in Berlin, we talked to people, including people within the CDU/CSU, and the sense was that Merkel herself was driving so much of this policy with regard to Germany, with regard to Russia. What's your sense of her historical legacy now?

**Reinhard Bütikofer:**

I think that's increasingly becoming a bitter legacy, and it's falling apart. There have been people within CDU, like my good friend Elmar Brok, or Norbert Röttgen, the foreign policy expert, who took decisions positions that deviated from Merkel's line. From conversations with Merkel, I would assume that she harbored no illusions about the character of those regimes. She knew that Xi was building a totalitarian regime. I don't think she had any illusions about the character of Putin and his regime, but that's how I would reconstruct her policy during the later years. She had lost trust in the reliability of the transatlantic relationship, and she had lost trust in the ability of the European Union to really pull together. And if you don't think that you're powerful enough as Germany to eat from the same bowl with the Chinese forever, and if you don't hope to be able to rely on the transatlantic partnership as much as we have in the past, and if you don't expect to be transforming the union to really become a geopolitical player, well, then you end up where she ended up in trying to, yeah, to accommodate.

And famously, she said about the comprehensive agreement on investment with the Chinese, which she pushed very hard and which we have now put in the deep freeze in the European Parliament... I'm very proud of that. She said, "We have to take what we get now, because five years down the road, we wouldn't get the same." So that's a defeatist-

**Ken Weinstein:**

Yeah.

**Reinhard Bütikofer:**

... kind of attitude. And I think that was a result of the fallout in the transatlantic relations. It also reflects how important for us, in Germany, the transatlantic relation is really.

**Ken Weinstein:**

I know there was deep frustration with President Trump in Germany in particular, but in the end, as someone who personally was supportive of the Trump administration, my sense was the president's frustration wasn't so much with Europe and with NATO as it was with Germany. He wanted 2% spending. He wanted LNG terminals. He wanted less dependence on Nord Stream. And literally, everything that he was pushing for now has happened. Obviously, criticisms can be made of the tone in which he did it and the like. He was merciless in his criticisms of Chancellor Merkel, when she came to the White House, about the German army, the famous stories where, "Your planes don't fly. Your ships don't sail. Your submarines don't submerge. You're borrowing these taxi helicopters from civilian services. Yet you guys build the best cars in the world." He was merciless with her.

**Reinhard Bütikofer:**

Well, he was. But he wasn't... not just merciless with her.

**Ken Weinstein:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Reinhard Bütikofer:
He was also merciless... and I can't forgive that, even less... with the European Union as a project. He denounced the European Union as an enemy, as a foe, that was his quote, as a foe worse than China.

Ken Weinstein:
Yeah.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
You can have some fancy ideas, but I think that's so far off the mark. And being rude to people puts them off. But attacking the core political identity of a partner and ally, that's a real big thing. He refused, throughout his presidency, to reiterate, in plain and simple words, the pledge that all previous U.S. presidents had made that they would sustain Article 5 of the NATO charter. He tried to find weasel words around that. So that really created a level of distrust that went beyond the personal attitudes.

Ken Weinstein:
Sure. Let's pivot towards China, where you have been a remarkable voice in the European Parliament. I mentioned earlier, you have been personally sanctioned, as have a number of our Hudson Institute colleagues. You're in good company here.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
The list is getting longer.

Ken Weinstein:
Exactly. But it's not that big as of yet. As you look at both European business, German business... One of the most striking things, in the United States, we've seen in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine is this broad sense in the business community that the impossible can become quite possible. The unthinkable can become thinkable. There was a recent poll of American business leaders, and it was stunning the percentage of people who are quite concerned now about the possible seizure of their assets in China if China decides to invade Taiwan, a similar situation to what happened in Russia. And it's quite striking that people are now increasingly thinking of pulling out of China. I'm wondering if German business... Volkswagen, obviously, has got this infamous plant in Xinjiang. We know about Audi's dependence on China as well... what your sense is of, is German business rethinking its role in China now or not?

Reinhard Bütikofer:
German business started rethinking its attitude towards China in 2016. And one of the opening shots for that was the Made in China 2025 strategy, which clearly laid out a nationalist perspective for the economic development of China, which clearly signaled to the international community that we shouldn't expect to be dealt with as partners in the medium and long term. One business representative in a seminar that we just had yesterday at CSIS said, "Well, if you bring indispensable technology, and if you bring indispensable production capacity to China, you're welcome. But if they can substitute what you bring to the table, you're going to be shown the door." It's happened with the rail industry. It's happened with the solar industry. And I'm not even sure that our great economic pillar of the German economy, the automotive industry, is safe against that, because, I mean, e-cars, new energy vehicles, are not rocket science.
I recall talking to an automotive engineer a couple of years ago, and he would say, "Look, even 70 years from now, we will build the best combustion engines in Germany." I guess he would've been right. But seven years from now, nobody cares, because we’re shifting the technology. And there even less advanced capabilities can do well in the market. So once the Chinese find the potential to substitute, we’re not seen as partners. And that struck home in that conversation. Then, on top of that, there was the acquisition of one of the crown jewels of German technology, Kuka, by a Chinese so-called private company under the instruction of the Communist Party. And that started a very interesting debate that culminated in a strategy paper on China strategy by the German Federation of Industry in January, 2019. And that was a really opening salvo, very critical, more critical in its language than anything I've seen from AmCham since. And over the years, other industrial associations, like the engineering industry, the electrical industry, have been following suit, also BusinessEurope.

Ken Weinstein:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Reinhard Bütikofer:
And that is also reflecting the fact that for many years, the economic relationships had really been adequately described, at least for the German part, as a win-win solution. We provided the high tech and the luxury cars that they craved, and they provided the cheap commodities. So there wasn't really much competition. But as the Chinese began moving up through the value chain, they became competitors, and their propensity to not play by the rules became more important for us. So that changed the conversation. And today some of the leaders of industrial organizations like BDI are also very clear on the record. The president of BDI has been attacked publicly by Global Times for his statements on ethical limits to investment, where he clearly indicated that there should be limits with regard to involvement in Xinjiang.

Now, that has not resulted in a widespread withdrawal from China. That's the interesting part. Rather, the opposite. Last year, according to figures from the European Chamber of Commerce in China, 77% of European investors made the best profits ever. And the level of investment has been increasing by double digit numbers over the years. Also last year. To some degree, this is being explained as a curious, unintended consequence of regulatory battles.

Ken Weinstein:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Reinhard Bütikofer:
Business that still feels the attractiveness of the huge Chinese market... 50% of the chemical industry-

Ken Weinstein:
Sure.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
... potential is in China. Huge percentages also in other sectors... they feel threatened by the increasing regulatory battles between U.S. and the Chinese. So they try to, basically, complete their supply chains and their activities in China as to not be cut off as an effect of these controversies. And that results in increasing the investment. But just recently, as an effect of the Ukraine crisis, in a poll industry representatives indicated there might be a rethinking now. More than 50% argued that they expected a
change of China policy at the headquarters. About a third said they would postpone or put off intended investment. So exactly the same kind of reaction that you described for American business is also now happening. But the real issue is that some of our businesses have put so many eggs into that Chinese basket that China has become a cluster risk for them. And it's very hard. I mean, I'm a frequent critic of Volkswagen, but you can't expect the company to turn on a heel.

Ken Weinstein:
Right. [crosstalk 00:28:47].

Reinhard Bütikofer:
They can't. So how do we devise a strategy that helps them, getting rid of their unilateral dependency? That's a real issue.

Ken Weinstein:
That is a challenge. Listen, we got time for one more question. And you have a very busy schedule in your trip here to Washington. The Uighurs. You have been an incredible voice on their behalf in Brussels. You were honored here, the other night in Washington, for what you've done. You've led this campaign to boycott the Olympics and the like. And a number of U.S. followed your advice, didn't watch a minute of it. Let me ask you where you see things going, internally in Germany and in Europe more broadly, on that subject.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
That's a very strong cause in the European Parliament, to start from where I work. We have an overwhelming level of unity, and it includes all the major democratic groups. So from the very conservative, center right, center left, the Free Democrats, the European liberals, the Greens, we're all united on these issues, pushing very hard. I believe that we have been instrumental in convincing the European Council last year, in March, to impose sanctions on some four individuals and one entity in Xinjiang for the atrocities that they have been part of. I would still say those were very moderate sanctions. The Chinese escalated in retaliation. You mentioned that. So this is a contentious, very contentious, issue, and it has resulted in the blocking of the ratification process of the investment agreement.

I would still assume there are some changes impending, possibly. There is talk that China might want to ratify ILO core Convention 29, against forced labor, without acknowledging that they have forced labor, just sort of going through the motions, basically. I also heard from some Uighurs, at the reception where we met, that there are some practical changes. Some of their relatives that had not been allowed to visit Beijing or other parts of China are now allowed to travel a little bit. So I think the Chinese are, on one hand, trying to damp down the criticism. On the other hand, they may feel very confident that they are on top of the issue. I believe it would be very important if international organizations like the Human Rights commissioner of the United Nations would finally put out the report on that. She's been invited to China, but she's not been granted the conditions for an unimpeded visit. So she might not go, but she should put out the report.

I would also hope that some other countries would join the chorus. I mean, it's a strong issue in Australia, in New Zealand, in Japan, in Europe, in the US, in Canada. But some Muslim majority countries that are also authoritarian are rather on the side of China, which is also not helpful. I think we have to persevere, that it's going to take a long sprint because really, the policy that Xi Jinping pursues is annihilating the ethnic and cultural identity, if not sort of committing genocide completely. But certainly,
if you look at the policies that Adrian Zenz has sort of made public to the world, they want to deny... not just the Uighurs, by the way. Also the Mongols and the Tibetans.

Ken Weinstein:
Tibetans. Sure.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
They wanted to deny them what has been guaranteed to them in the Chinese constitution, their ethnic and cultural identity. And this is a long-term project, and that’s why we have to stick with it.

Ken Weinstein:
Well, on that note, I just want to thank member of the European Parliament Reinhard Bütikofer for your very important moral voice, not just in the European Parliament, just in Germany, but around the world. And all of U.S. admire your immense dedication and your insight. Thank you for joining U.S. at Hudson Institute.

Reinhard Bütikofer:
Thank you for having me.