

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Success of the German Greens: Why It Matters to Asia

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

Recent success of the German Greens proves that the formerly radical eco-party has long entered mainstream politics. This has ramifications for Germany, Europe, and even Asia.

COMMENTARY

GERMANS OF a certain age will remember when the Green Party (*Bündnis90/DieGrünen*) entered the *Bundestag* in 1983. The unorthodox fashion-style of the new MPs, dressed in woolly jumpers and sneakers, symbolised the first substantial postwar diversification of parliament.

This diluted the elite comprising the centre-right Conservative Union (CDU/CSU), centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), and Liberals.

From Anti-establishment to the Chancellery

The Greens were a radical protest party. An array of environmentalists, feminists, and peace and human rights activists, the Greens saw themselves as a grassroots movement to challenge the establishment; against nuclear energy, US nuclear-missiles based in West Germany, and the neglect of environmental issues.

Petra Kelly, founding member, once [accurately described](#) the Greens as the 'anti-party party'. Now, some 36 years later, the Greens have become the establishment they once set out to fight.

One of the most respected German politicians, Norbert Lammert (CDU), once delivered a keynote in front of an assembly of Green members, remarking that they

would have to admit that eventually the system had changed the Greens more than the Greens had changed the system. After an awkward silence, Lammert received loud applause.

Nothing symbolises this change more than the character Josef “Joschka” Fischer. Once a radical left-wing militant, Fischer became the first ever Green state-level minister in 1985 and then widely respected and successful foreign minister and vice-chancellor in 1998.

Notwithstanding this journey from fundamental opposition to governing responsibility, until this year, speculating about a Green German chancellor would have been called hopelessly naïve eco-idealism. Since this year’s European elections, however, a Green chancellor seems at least a possibility.

The Green Wave: European or German?

In most [recent polling](#), the German Greens trend around 23% (8.9% in 2017), just behind the governing CDU/CSU with 27% (32.9% in 2017) and way ahead of the third-placed far-right AfD with 15%. Despite being predominantly a party of younger voters in the urban west, two recent eastern state elections, where voters generally have a different socio-economic profile, have produced respectable results for the Greens, too.

The current trend is obvious and a CDU/CSU-Green coalition emerging from the next general election is not unlikely, despite reservations within both parties.

In Europe, meanwhile, Green parties celebrated their electoral success under the hash-tag #GreenWave. Indeed, with the Greens/EFA parliamentary group winning 74 seats (52 in 2014), the European green wave is as real as the German.

However, a detailed look at the [European results](#) suggests that #GreenWave should accurately be named #GermanGreenWave. The German Greens achieved a remarkable 20.5%, doubling their previous result, and now accounting for over one-third of the Greens/EFA; this excellent result for the German Greens is indicative of the regional divide.

It was mostly Northern and Western Europe where Greens gained votes. Yet no seats were won in Southern and Eastern Europe, where green topics tend to be secondary.

Why the Greens Are Winning

The cause of their success is three-fold. Firstly, the unquestionable global attention to “green topics” boosts the party. In the run up to the European elections, environmental issues and Greta Thunberg’s “FridaysForFuture” climate-activist movement had dominated political discourse and news agenda. The Greens partly owe their recent polling success to a Swedish teenager.

Second, the increasing pluralisation of the German political party landscape results in the permanent decline of the two dominant parties in German politics, to the benefit of marginal parties.

The Greens' success story is, thus, more than just a post-materialistic environmental concern. It rather illustrates the increasing dissatisfaction with established parties that have either shared power among themselves or formed the majority party in a coalition with a marginal party ever since the founding of the German Republic.

Lastly and most importantly, the German Greens have become a professional political party, consisting of different factions and representing a broad spectrum of interests. Moreover, many of their federal MPs have governing and even ministerial experience. Greens also govern in several German states, and in Baden-Württemberg there is even a Green prime minister.

Green Foreign Policy

It is highly likely that the Greens will once again assume national governing responsibility – and from a much stronger position than previously. Similarly, the strengths of the Greens/EFA in the EU parliament will impact EU policies in the near-future.

Green bread-and-butter issues, especially carbon restrictions, will dominate their agenda. However, more relevant for Asia are those policies the Greens will be reluctant to support: military engagement and free-trade.

As noted in a previous [RSIS Commentary](#), anti-militarism is embedded within the Greens' political DNA. Their [current manifesto](#) prescribes utmost restraint regarding military deployments, and in fact warns against increasing military spending and procurement.

There should not be any military deployment without explicit UN mandate and their EU manifesto explicitly rejects the NATO defence spending agreement of at least 2% of GDP.

Implications for Asia

This further complicates the necessary advancement of Germany's and the EU's global security actorness. This would make any German or European military presence in Asia, including freedom of navigation operations and military exercises, less likely and bridle Europe's smart military power abroad.

This is particularly true if successful German Greens were to spurn a coalition with the CDU/CSU, but entered a tripartite-coalition with the SPD and the far-left *Die Linke*, who broadly share such ideals.

Similarly, free-trade negotiations would be impacted. The Greens are decidedly normative in their attitudes. On trade, this means prioritising ecological sustainability, human rights, environmental and labour standards over economic gains.

Hence, current FTA negotiations with a number of Southeast Asian countries would be curtailed even further, while it becomes harder to open new ones, as standards and requirements rise.

The Green parties are here to stay as an established force in both Germany and Europe. To what extent this will impact German and European foreign and security policy will depend on how much further the Greens move away from their idealist origins and towards pragmatic realism.

Dr. Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg