

Germany at a Crossroads Over the Silk Road

by Rainer Apel

March 24—A fierce fight has been raging behind the scenes in Germany for months, about whether the German government and German industry should rally behind the obstructive approach of the European Commission, or whether a constructive approach should be taken, toward China's New Silk Road.

This fight broke out into the open on the eve of Chinese President Xi Jinping's historic three-day visit to Italy, March 22-24, when Germany's premier state-run national television network, ARD, ran a slanderous prime-time report on March 18, charging China with pursuing a geopolitical world power agenda with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The report included a clip from an interview with Hans von Helldorff, president of the Federal Association of the German Silk Road Initiative (BVDSI). Von Helldorff charged that by opposing China, the German ministries of Economics and Foreign Affairs were fostering the risk that German industry would be excluded from the BRI dynamic. It was the first time that ARD has taken such prominent note of the BVDSI since the latter's founding 18 months ago.

Von Helldorff and several co-thinkers in the German industrial *Mittelstand* (small and medium-sized enterprises) decided to create the BVDSI to have an institution that would fight for the genuine interests of those enterprises in active cooperation with the BRI.

This ARD television program attacking the Belt and

Road, provoked an avalanche of media attacks on China. The online version of *Bildzeitung*, Germany's leading mass tabloid, had a lengthy dossier on March 19, presenting the false claim that the BVDSI is an agent of Chinese geopolitics. That dossier included a link to a video on the BVDSI website, showing Hans von Helldorff's speech to a February 27 Schiller Institute seminar in Berlin. He is pictured sitting right next to the Institute's founder and president, Helga Zepp-LaRouche.

Helldorff, one of the main speakers at this seminar, charged the German elites with refusing to take notice of the worldwide changes that are underway, whereas China's elites have proven that they are capable of learning and improving.



EIRNS/Christopher Lewis

Hans von Helldorff, spokesman for the Federal Association of the German Silk Road Initiative, addresses the Schiller Institute conference, "The Urgent Need for a New Paradigm in International Relations," Bad Soden, Germany, July 1, 2018.

New World Economic Order Emerging

The new world economic order that is emerging, can be built only through cooperation, and not through confrontation, von Hellendorff said. China has already committed \$1 trillion to BRI projects, but in order to realize its full potential, another \$4 trillion would have to come from the western industrial nations. The BVDSI was created in order to make these opportunities known to the German *Mittelstand*, making repeated direct references to Helga Zepp-LaRouche, who was shown in the video clip sitting to his right.

On March 20, *Bildzeitung's* print edition—with a circulation of more than 4 million copies nationally—ran on its second page, a shortened version of the online dossier, attacking the BVDSI for its stated intent to “call the attention of German politics in a focused way to the positive aspects of the initiative of the Chinese government for the revitalization of the Silk Road.” *Bildzeitung* quoted the BVDSI further stating that it is important that “Germany and the EU wake up and replace the present policy of restraint and the policy of confrontation with a policy of cooperation.”

For the tabloid, these statements—and the fact that the Swiss Interrail Holding AG, which maintains logistical relations with the Chinese railway system, once financed an event of the BVDSI—made the BVDSI “dubious China lobbyists.” The print edition of *Bildzeitung*, however, did not run the link to the video, but did charge the Federal Ministry of Transport with supporting the BVDSI.

Under the pressure of this heavy harassment by *Bildzeitung*, the Ministry of Transport made it known the same day, March 20, that it no longer supported the BVDSI, and that it no longer shared the views of the association. On March 21, *Bildzeitung* gloatingly reported the ministry's statement. Much of the tabloid's arguments against China originated with the Sino-phobe Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin, which in its latest “China Update 6/2019,” complained that “irrespective of mounting European



President of France Emmanuel Macron.

Kremlin/RU

Union criticism of China's Silk Road Initiative, Italy is joining it,” and that Italy was even determined to sign “a controversial Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) during Xi Jinping's visit.

MERICS claimed that France and Germany are doing well in their trade with China without such a Memorandum, and neither Poland nor other central European states that have signed such MOUs with China have had any benefit from the MOUs, quoting Macron alleging that China does not respect the sovereignty of other nations. Lucrezia Poggatti, Italian member of the MERICS staff, charged that Italy would “damage its credibility” in the EU, if it signed the MOU with the China.

Deutschlandfunk (DLF), Germany's national radio station, ran similar propaganda against the Italian plans with China on March 22, quoting European Parliament President, (from the Forza Italia party), Antonio Tajani's hysterical warning: “Do you want some alien in your house, who is buying everything from you? Kitchen, sleeping room, furniture? Then, you will soon be guests in your own house.”

DLF however also quoted Michele Geraci, Undersecretary of State in the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, saying that he has been active as an investment banker in China for ten years, and came back to Italy this past year to join the new government: “I have returned, enthused by the idea that Italy will reconquer its rank as an economically important country. Not just in a formal sense, but in substance.”

Geraci told DLF that Italy will not give anything

away to China, but instead hopes to intensify trade with China: “With the present Memorandum of Understanding, we are trying to make good lost time. The Germans have done that in the past 10-15 years, rather well. We however do not have another 10-years’ time. What we are doing now is a means of acceleration.” An “acceleration program made by Geraci,” DLF commented, claiming that Geraci was the only “economic professional” in the Italian government, charging it with not knowing anything about economic issues at all.



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Heiko Maas, German Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Failed Arm Twisting and Media Hype

If the intent of all that media hype in Germany over Italy and China was to prevent the Italians from signing that MOU with China, it failed. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was speaking into the wind on March

24, about the MOU that had been signed in Rome the day before, when he said that Italy was about to be drawn into “a dependency by China.”

If the intent of that media hype was to manipulate public opinion in Germany, it will prove to be much more difficult now, given the efforts of the BVDSI and the Schiller Institute, institutions that are openly challenging the anti-China sentiments, which has now been made a prominent fact for the public. The arm twisting against those with pro-China views, which has long been practiced by the elites and the mainstream media behind the scenes, will be replaced by a struggle

before the eyes of the public for the concept of German cooperation with China. The BVDSI will also fully formalize its role, with a congress in Bremen on March 29.

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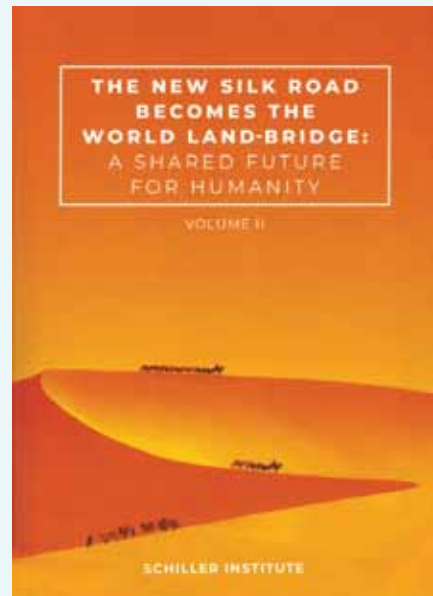
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