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## Is Germany China's new best friend?

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589 words

1 September 2012

[Straits Times](#)

STIMES

English

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Show of close ties during Merkel's visit, hailed as a success by some

BEIJING - With Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao by her side, visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel toured the Forbidden City and took a high-speed train ride to Mr Wen's home city of Tianjin to see the roll-out of the 100th Airbus jet made there.

Mr Wen had also gone the extra mile when Dr Merkel visited China in February, going with her to Guangzhou.

Dr Merkel, in turn, led nine Cabinet members and the biggest delegation to China for a two-day visit that ended yesterday.

Such shows of friendship have some asking, is Germany becoming China's new best friend?

After all, they have no overlapping territorial claims, only overlapping economic interests.

Both are major manufacturers and exporters, as well as each other's top trade partners in their respective continents.

China needs Germany's technological know-how, while the Germans need its markets.

Germany banks on China to help the European Union overcome the euro debt crisis; China looks to Germany to boost confidence in a region that is one of its biggest export markets.

Indeed, their economic and trade ties have grown very quickly, after the onset in 2009 of the European sovereign debt crisis, said Europe expert Cui Hongjian.

German officials have dubbed Sino-German ties a "special relationship", reminiscent of that between the United States and Britain, but analysts say it is a stretch to call them even close friends.

"Economically they are very important to each other. But it doesn't mean that they like each other so much," said Dr Wang Jianguo, an expert in trade law and international relations at the National University of Singapore.

They do not share common values or a security bond like that between the US and Europe, he said.

Indeed, human rights issues stuck out in Sino-German relations only a few years back.

In 2007, Dr Merkel angered Beijing when she met the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. She also stayed away from the 2008 Olympics.

However, on her latest visit, the sixth to China as chancellor, Dr Merkel is more focused on economics. She and Mr Wen held talks with businessmen from both sides, apart from visiting the Airbus factory in Tianjin.

While some hail her visit as a success, others say both sides did not really get what they wanted.

Germany had wanted China to help buy bonds issued by the governments of troubled Spain and Italy. But Mr Wen did not give a concrete promise and said China had to first consider the risks.

Even the trumpeted sale of 50 Airbus A-320 jets was not as good as expected - the Europeans had hoped for an order of 100 planes.

China in turn did not get what it really wanted, added Dr Wang.

There was no progress on Beijing's wish to have a larger say in institutions like the [International Monetary Fund](#), or to lift a ban on arms sales to China.

Still, the two sides have strong economic and trade links that look to stay the course.

Said Dr Wang: "They complement each other economically, that's why they are each other's biggest markets. And that's why this relationship will last."

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#### SEE OPINION

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at Beijing's Forbidden City yesterday. -- PHOTO: XINHUA

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Document STIMES0020120831e89100005

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