



Security Nexus Perspectives

LOOKING FOR DIRECTION: GERMANY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Abstract

When Germany implemented its *Indo-Pacific Guidelines* in 2020, it signaled the nation's first step into a foreign policy direction that would encompass amplified considerations of the impact dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region have on Germany's and Europe's interests. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, growing tensions in the South and East China Sea, and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on human security matters, talk of protecting the existing rules-based international order (RBIO) increased. Yet, Germany is still defining how and to what extent it intends to increase its regional involvement. Budget restrictions and NATO responsibilities in Europe impede greater military involvement, and its ambiguous stance on the Taiwan Strait issue complicates cooperation with regional partners and diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Yet, other forms of involvement would specify the nation's Indo-Pacific policies and support maintaining the RBIO, such as an amplified focus on collaborative projects on resilience and sustainability in Oceania and Southeast Asia, diversification in trade relations with partners aside from the PRC, and enhanced interagency measures regarding institutional coordination to deal with gray-zone activities, especially concerning cyber and maritime security issues.

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Looking for Direction: Germany in the Indo-Pacific

In early 2022, the German government officially announced the development of its national security strategy. According to Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, the strategy focuses on three essential points, namely the assurance of a free and resilient democracy, the invulnerability of lives – especially under consideration of violence and war –, and the protection of environment and resources that safeguard the fundamental necessities of our lives.² European countries have become increasingly aware of the vulnerability of their regional security system due to the war in Ukraine. This initiated countries like Germany to actively consider the importance of the existing rules-based international order (RBIO) for Europe and beyond.³ As stated by Timo Kather on the Ministry of Defense's website, this consideration includes a strengthened focus on developments in the Indo-Pacific region, especially regarding China.⁴ Even without a comprehensive policy direction, Germany's recent foreign politics reflect an enhanced understanding of the Indo-Pacific's significance for its national interests and in the context of the principles of the RBIO, particularly regarding maritime security concerns. The Federal Government's *Indo-Pacific Guidelines 2020* underscore such concerns by highlighting the region's importance for the world's maritime trade and its interlinkage with prosperity.⁵ As the document further lays out, these aspects are strongly supported and navigated under regulatory frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁶ In this regard, enhanced cooperation is crucial to guarantee regional stability and global economic security.

A recent dossier from the German Ministry of Defense underlines this assumption by stating that Asia is the most dynamic region for growth. Important trade routes also run through the Indo-Pacific.⁷ Restrictions and disturbances of these trade routes would have severe repercussions for supply chains from and to Europe and, consequently, for Germany's welfare. As further emphasized by the Federal Foreign Office in 2021, challenges interlinked with geopolitical rivalries, border disputes, or the climate crisis significantly affect the region's stability.⁸ As a result, the Office's article states that "Germany is committed to strengthening the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region, to ensure that it remains a place of inclusive cooperation... [and] therefore advocates open shipping routes, open markets, and free trade, a level playing field, digitalization, connectivity, and human rights."⁹

² German Federal Foreign Office. "Towards a National Security Strategy – the launch." Mar 18, 2022. [Towards a National Security Strategy - the launch - Federal Foreign Office \(auswaertiges-amt.de\)](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de)

³ German Federal Ministry of Defence. "The National Security Strategy: First Expert Meeting at the Bendlerblock." Jul 8, 2022. [National Security Strategy: Expert Meeting at the Bendlerblock | BMVg.de](https://www.bmvg.de)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Federal Government (Germany). *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Germany – Europe – Asia, Shaping the 21st Century Together*. Federal Foreign Office. Berlin, Germany. August 2020. [Leitlinien zum Indo-Pazifik \(auswaertiges-amt.de\)](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ German Federal Ministry of Defence. "Engagement im Indo-Pazifik." Accessed: Jun 12, 2023. [Sicherheitspolitisches Engagement im Indo-Pazifik \(bmvg.de\)](https://www.bmvg.de)

⁸ German Federal Foreign Office. "The Indo-Pacific Region." Oct 28, 2021. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussepolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/indo-pacific/2493040>

⁹ Ibid.

Germany and the Indo-Pacific

Just about two years ago, Germany sent the *Bayern* frigate to the Indo-Pacific, an action which indicated initial signs that Germany understood the long-reaching implications of the region's dynamics on international order – and its effects on Germany's security and economic interests. Former Minister of Defense Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer reflects this in her statement that the Indo-Pacific is vital for Germany's interests and benefits regarding the rules-based order and freedom of navigation.¹⁰ It was the first time after almost twenty years that a frigate of the German *Bundeswehr* set out to journey through the Indo-Pacific, participating in various joint missions and maneuvers concerning, for example, surveillance of UN sanctions against North Korea, or anti-piracy missions.¹¹ Yet, the dispatch of the *Bayern* was viewed quite critically by members of the coalition, mostly based on arguments that the German navy should focus on its presence in the Mediterranean area, Germany's ambiguous stance in its relation with China regarding the Taiwan Strait issue, and a lack of unison of action with European partners and the U.S.¹²

Despite the criticism, the *Bayern's* mission successfully initiated deepened relationships with regional partners through dialogue and joint exercises.¹³ As Alexandra Sakaki and Göran Swistek mentioned, the "naval mission underlines the growing importance of maritime diplomacy as a policy tool for Germany's and Europe's naval forces beyond their home waters."¹⁴ Even though it remains yet to be seen how Germany contributes to the maintenance of the existing RBIO, recent diplomatic efforts reconfirm the Federal Government's course for further involvement in collaboration with partners in the region. Following deepened talks, especially with Australia and Japan, the current Minister of Defense, Boris Pistorius, just met with his Japanese counterpart Yasukazu Hamada while on his journey with Federal Chancellor Scholz's delegation of ministers to Japan. In the framework of his visit, Pistorius emphasized the continuance of enhancing military cooperation with Japan.¹⁵ The encounter signals Germany's intent to intensify its involvement in Indo-Pacific affairs which is also reflected in the *Joint Statement 1st Japan-Germany Inter-Governmental Consultations, March 18,*

¹⁰ Stuchlik, Stephan. "Deutschland schickt Fregatte als 'Zeichen für Stabilität' in den Indopazifik." Tagesthemen. Tagesschau. ARD Berlin. [Deutschland schickt Fregatte als "Zeichen für Stabilität" in den Indopazifik | tagesschau.de](https://www.tagesschau.de/indopazifik/2022-02-18-deutschland-schickt-fregatte-als-zeichen-fuer-stabilitaet-in-den-indopazifik-101.html)

original: "Die Botschaft ist ganz klar. Der Indopazifik ist ein Raum, der für uns von Interesse ist. Auch dort geht es um regelbasierte Ordnung, auf der... von der wir profitieren und wir sind gemeinsam mit den Partnern vor Ort, um etwa die Freiheit der Schifffahrt auch zu garantieren." (*tagesschau*, 00:30-00:46)

¹¹Zeit Online. "Fregatte 'Bayern' aus Indopazifik zurück." Feb 18, 2022. [Verteidigung: Fregatte "Bayern" aus Indopazifik zurück | ZEIT ONLINE](https://www.zeit-online.de/2022/02/18/verteidigung-fregatte-bayern-aus-indopazifik-zurueck-101.html) adapted from: dpa Niedersachsen.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sakaki, Alexandra and Swistek, Göran. "Return from the Choppy Waters of the Indo-Pacific: Implications of the Deployment of the Frigate Bayern." SWP Comment No. 22. March 2022. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Berlin, Germany.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Federal Ministry of Defence. "Deutschland und Japan: Militärkooperation im Indo-Pazifik wird ausgebaut." Mar 19, 2023. [Deutsch-japanische Militärkooperation wächst \(bmvg.de\)](https://www.bmvg.de/aktuelle-kooperationen/2023-03-19-deutschland-und-japan-militaerkooperation-im-indo-pazifik-wird-ausgebaut)

2023.¹⁶ The document's rhetoric emphasizes the significance of geostrategic considerations about economic security issues, promising to “make efforts to establish a legal framework for bilateral defense and security cooperation activities, such as rendering logistical assistance and support.”¹⁷

Whereas diplomatic and military cooperation with regional partners like Japan is certainly in Germany's interests regarding contemporary dynamics both in Europe and the Indo-Pacific that threaten the structures of the RBIO, it remains questionable to what extent the *Bundeswehr's* capacities are sufficient to support extensive military exercises and operations in the region. Although Defense Minister Pistorius has pushed for a €10 billion increase in Germany's defense budget next year,¹⁸ current developments regarding the war in Ukraine and Germany's NATO obligations, as well as the core points of the *Indo-Pacific Guidelines* Annalena Baerbock lined out, pose the question if joining the ongoing arms build-up in the Indo-Pacific is desirable. The investment of the increased budget still needs to be prioritized, meaning, according to Pistorius, “the protection of the eastern flank of NATO”¹⁹ and with that, to provide adequate equipment to support NATO's Response Force. Moreover, Chancellor Scholz's announcement of the €100 billion special fund last year to procure necessary equipment for the Federal Armed Forces in the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine signals the prioritization of first answering the *Bundeswehr's* needs for modernization in context with geopolitical dynamics in Europe.²⁰

Regional Resilience and Sustainability

Resilience and sustainability are core issues of German political agendas. Interestingly enough, there are programs that connect such matters with concerns of the RBIO. Governmentally funded programs like projects of the Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and Rule of Law, for example, provide technical and legal advice and capacity building in Southeast Asia in the framework of workshops, some of which also include understanding implications of international regulations like UNCLOS to strengthen intra-regional cooperation. Further south in the region toward Oceania, the GIZ is another important partner in furthering cooperative efforts of sustainability and resilience.²¹ This institution responds to prevalent human security issues like rising sea levels, over-exploitation of natural resources, or limited trade capacities due to geographic circumstances, and is tasked by

¹⁶ *Joint Statement 1st Japan-Germany Inter-Governmental Consultations*. Mar 18, 2023. Tokyo, Japan. [100476976.pdf \(mofa.go.jp\)](https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100476976.pdf)<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100476976.pdf><https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100476976.pdf> / [Gemeinsame Erklärung der 1. Deutsch-Japanischen Regierungskonsultationen, Tokio, 18. März 2023 \(bundesregierung.de\)](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/2023/03/23-03-18-1-1.html)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Siebold, Sabine (reporting) and Fincher, Christina (ed.). “German defence minister pushes for 10 bln euro budget increase – Spiegel.” Reuters. Feb 10, 2023. [German defence minister pushes for 10 bln euro budget increase - Spiegel | Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-defence-minister-pushes-10-bl-euro-budget-increase-2023-02-10/)

¹⁹ Global Security. “Germany – Military Spending.” [Germany - Military Spending \(globalsecurity.org\)](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/geo/germany.html) accessed: Jun 12, 2023.

²⁰ The Federal Government (Germany). “Bundestag Approves Special Fund: 100 Billion Euros For a Powerful Federal Armed Forces.” Jun 3, 2022. [Bundestag approves special fund to strengthen the Federal Armed Forces | Federal Government \(bundesregierung.de\)](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/2022/06/22-06-03-1-1.html) /DW News. “How Will Germany Spend Its Massive €100 Billion Military Budget?” DW News - Youtube. Mar 30, 2022. [372\) How will Germany spend its massive €100 billion military budget? | DW News - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=372)

²¹ German Society for International Cooperation

German Federal ministries and the German Federal Foreign Office.²² Collaborative projects dealing with climate-induced displacement, renewable energy, and disaster management are particularly significant.

The Issue of Gray-Zone Activities

At the same time, interrelated economic and maritime security issues are not the only challenges Germany needs to consider regarding increased involvement in the Indo-Pacific. In general, gray-zone activities occur more and more often, not only in maritime areas comprising territorial disputes like the South and East China Sea, but also in the realm of cyber and energy, posing a growing threat to human security matters of our daily lives from issues of mis- and disinformation that manipulate voting behavior to hacking attacks on energy supply facilities. As the International Energy Agency points out, “[f]or electricity systems, the threat of cyberattack is substantial and growing, and threat actors are becoming increasingly sophisticated at carrying out attacks – both in their destructive capabilities and their ability to identify vulnerabilities.”²³ Projecting the issue of gray-zone activities back on the maritime security challenges, they currently impede the joint action-taking process in reacting to such events occurring.²⁴ As Pamela Kennedy and Yuki Tatsumi from the US-Taiwan-Japan Maritime Safety Working Group point out in their report, “[...] the lack of options to respond to gray-zone activities presents a challenge for cooperation that seeks to stabilize the region.”²⁵

Recommendations for Further Direction

In hindsight of this analysis, it is clear that Germany is still defining its politics regarding the Indo-Pacific. Occurrences of gray-zone activities are increasing, both globally and in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, it would be recommendable for Germany to take measures in collaboration with regional governmental and military practitioners alike that would support a more precise understanding of what gray-zone activities comprise and how to act under their occurrence, especially if the country were to amplify its involvement in, for example, joint military exercises. Moreover, there is potential for enhanced cooperation among European countries in this framework under prospects of the European Council's implementation of the "Coordinated Maritime Presences" (CMP) concept, which entails efforts to jointly coordinate maritime presences in the north-western Indian Ocean and enhance the EU's reliability as a maritime security provider and offer further opportunities of greater European engagement in the region.²⁶ In this regard, it would be beneficial for partner countries to

²² German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ). "Oceania." [Oceania - giz.de](https://www.giz.de/en/regions/oceania) As at: Dec 31, 2022; accessed: Jun 12, 2023.

²³ International Energy Agency (IEA). "Cyber Resilience," in: Power Systems in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities Ahead for Electricity Security. Oct 2020. Pp. 38-46. [Power systems in transition - Challenges and opportunities ahead for electricity security \(windows.net\)](https://www.iea.org/reports/power-systems-in-transition-challenges-and-opportunities-ahead-for-electricity-security)

²⁴ Further elaborations on this issue can be found in Hideshi Tokuchi's article "The Gray Zone in the Definition of Gray-Zone Warfare: Challenges for Japan-U.S. Cooperation" (NRB Special Report #90, May 2021)

²⁵ Kennedy, Pamela and Tatsumi, Yuki. "US-Taiwan-Japan Maritime Safety Working Group Report." Stimson Center. Nov 14, 2022. [US-Taiwan-Japan Maritime Safety Working Group Report • Stimson Center](https://www.stimson.org/research-report/2022/09/us-taiwan-japan-maritime-safety-working-group-report)

²⁶ Council of the European Union (Press). "Coordinated Maritime Presences: Council Extends Implementation in the Gulf of Guinea for Two Years and Establishes a New Maritime Area of Interest in the North-Western Indian Ocean." Feb 21, 2022. [Coordinated Maritime Presences: Council extends implementation in the Gulf of Guinea for two years and establishes a new Maritime Area of Interest in the North-Western Indian Ocean - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/communications/1424/)

jointly improve cyber resilience while working out tangible consequences in the context of gray-zone activities, starting with how to define the term, determine its implications, and – based on a common understanding – improve joint action-taking in legal persecution and executive performances under the occurrence of such activities. An increased common understanding of these matters in the framework of the international order is significant as it strengthens comprehensive security cooperation between like-minded partners and simultaneously isolates state actors that resort to such activities while lining out more specific consequences.

In terms of military cooperation and under consideration of the nation's responsibilities in Europe and limited budget, it is further recommendable to invest in and extend capacities of technological enhancements and information-sharing programs, such as deeper involvement in the multilateral Enforcement Coordination Cell (ECC) in Yokosuka, Japan. This form of military capacity enhancement could also improve relations with Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries that increasingly deal with security matters of transnational crime and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF), issues that are often interrelated. Even though the costs might outweigh the benefits at first sight, amplified efforts to establish closer relations with South Pacific partners matters in fostering the maintenance of the RBIO's norms and values and, alongside the further intensification of development programs, advancing prospects of international relations that provide opportunities for diversification in trade relations as well as support for resilient and sustainable economic structures.

As sustainability and resilience are core issues of Germany's political agendas, it is also recommended to take a closer look at existing programs, especially in Southeast Asia, and how they could be efficiently enhanced. Programs like the aforementioned Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and Rule of Law's workshops and similar training projects could be further extended, as suggested by Sakaki and Swistek.²⁷ One such extension could also be applied to intra-regional cooperation programs in Oceania, especially regarding the interests and needs of Pacific Island countries which, similar to nations in Southeast Asia, face the issue of being drawn into a great power game they do not want to choose sides in. From matters of IUUF to transnational crimes and the issue of defining and implementing common regulations regarding gray-zone activities, it would be in the interest of Germany to advance cooperation programs that foster a common understanding of legal provisions that manage such issues and provide technical and diplomatic assistance to regional partners by enhancing regional resilience and, thereby, strengthen normative structures of the existing RBIO. In this context, collaborative projects of institutions like the GIZ should also be further highlighted in German policies pertaining to Oceania. Germany would increasingly support measures

27 Sakaki, Alexandra and Swistek, Göran. "Return from the Choppy Waters of the Indo-Pacific: Implications of the Deployment of the Frigate Bayern." SWP Comment No. 22. March 2022. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Berlin, Germany. / [Promoting Maritime Peace and Security in Southeast Asia – Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law \(mpfpr.de\)](#) / Max Planck Foundation (MPF) for International Peace and the Rule of Law. "Promoting Maritime Peace and Security in Southeast Asia." [Promoting Maritime Peace and Security in Southeast Asia – Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law \(mpfpr.de\)](#) and "International Connectivity and the Law of the Sea Workshop for ASEAN Member States and ASEAN Secretariat." [Promoting Maritime Peace and Security in Southeast Asia – Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law \(mpfpr.de\)](#), accessed: Jun 12, 2023.

to cope with the direct consequences of climate change that are happening right now and will exacerbate in the future. This is significant as it also affects European nations, starting with regional and global implications of climate-induced migration, which also have a growing impact on legal discussions regarding how to manage issues of sovereignty and access to resources of vanishing island nations in the future.²⁸

To strengthen the normative structures of the RBIO, Germany should also amplify its efforts to strengthen its economic relations with important trade partners aside from the PRC, like the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan, India, or Taiwan, which is Germany's fifth most important trading partner in Asia. Conversely, Germany is Taiwan's most important trading partner in the European Union.²⁹ Deepened relations in trade would thereby further diplomatic dialogues with regional partners that are essentially involved in security issues pertaining to the Indo-Pacific and share a common understanding of the norms and values of the RBIO. It further supports Germany's intention to look for diversification in trade relations in Asia and thereby decreases its heavy dependence on trade with China.³⁰

Conclusion

Keeping the core points Annalena Baerbock lined out in her speech in 2022 in mind, Germany should focus on the navigation and enhancement of relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific simultaneously under geostrategic considerations, issues of economic and human security, and aspects of resilience and sustainability. The nation's recent policies reflect an increasing awareness that the dynamics in the Indo-Pacific impact Germany's – and Europe's – security and economic interests and are interconnected with regional dynamics that imply traditional challenges from the Ukrainian War to non-traditional ones of climate change. This becomes specifically clear in the Foreign Service's article *Stronger Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region* September 14, 2022, which states: "Since 24 February 2022, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has shaken the foundations of the peaceful European order. Yet in the Indo-Pacific region, the rules-based international order is also coming under mounting pressure, geopolitical tensions are exacerbating territorial conflicts, and the risk of escalation is growing, for instance, in the Taiwan Strait. At the same time, the climate crisis is posing an increasing threat to the existence of many Indo-Pacific countries."³¹ German decision-makers need to determine what kind of approach the nation should take under consideration of its own national interests. An exclusive geostrategic approach would make little sense both in terms of Germany's current military capabilities and responsibilities in

²⁸ Further elaborations on this issue can be found in Maxine Burkett's article "The Nation *Ex-Situ*: On climate change, deterritorialized nationhood and the post-climate era" (2011), for example.

²⁹ German Federal Foreign Office. "Germany and Taiwan: Bilateral relations." Mar 21, 2023. [Promoting Maritime Peace and Security in Southeast Asia – Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law \(mpfpr.de\)](#) / Destatis (Statistisches Bundesamt). *Außenhandel: Ranking Germany's Trading Partners in Foreign Trade (Primary Results)*. May 12, 2023. [Ranking of Germany's trading partners in foreign trade\(englisch\)-2022_preliminary\(destatis.de\)](#)

³⁰ German Federal Foreign Office. "Visit to Asia: China, South Korea and the G7 Meeting in Japan." Apr 12, 2023. [Visit to Asia: China, South Korea, and the G7 meeting in Japan - Federal Foreign Office \(auswaertiges-amt.de\)](#)

³¹ German Federal Foreign Office. "Stronger Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region." Sep 14, 2022. [Stronger engagement in the Indo-Pacific region - Federal Foreign Office \(auswaertiges-amt.de\)](#)

Europe. Moreover, considering contemporary challenges in energy consumption, climate-induced migration, and the increase of actions that test the resilience of international institutions, it would make sense to rethink current foreign policy approaches and consider an amplified emphasis on socio-economic perspectives.

Whereas the pace of the PRC's military build-up is indeed something to keep an eye on and should certainly be included in any kind of foreign policy considerations, it remains questionable if it is in the framework of Germany's interests to join the current trend of the regional arms build-up at this point. It is clear that the common interest of maintaining the existing RBIO is a shared responsibility among partners, and, as pointed out in a recent IISS report, "...while the number of China's fleet of destroyers and frigates, or of heavy transport aircraft, may be relatively uniform, these fleets generally comprise more modern platforms than before."³² Yet, approaches on how to support such efforts can differ. Preparedness does not always mean an immense arms build-up but can also include effective intelligence sharing, technological efficiency, and military collaborations. Moreover, the overall importance of cybersecurity in such areas should not be underestimated, especially considering vulnerabilities in energy supply and information systems.

Regarding collaboration, it is difficult to match and navigate the interests and needs of the many partner nations in the region. As for the current situation – and by taking an estimated look into the near future – it would make the most sense for Germany to define its policies toward the Indo-Pacific based on a more enhanced and flexible policy system that efficiently coordinates bilateral and multilateral relations under consideration of the respective situation, interests, and needs of Germany and its partners. Germany should thereby focus on two major approaches under its *Indo-Pacific Guidelines 2020* to provide more comprehensive policies in the region: first, decision-makers should consider how Germany can enhance and improve institutional structures that support the existing rules-based international order and its principles; secondly, Germany should focus on actions that provide mid-term and long-term regional resilience and stability, under consideration of each nation's capacities and interests in the region. Germany's foreign policies should not simply signal "China's containment" but rather the intent to guarantee peace, security, and stability in the Indo-Pacific and, with that, also on a global scale.

³² Hackett, James. "Editor's Introduction to *The Military Balance 2023*." IISS. Feb 15, 2023. [Editor's introduction to The Military Balance 2023 \(iiss.org\)](https://www.iiss.org/en/military-balance-2023-introduction)



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