



# It started with a ship...

## What role does Germany play in the Indo Pacific's security architecture?

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While the strategic challenger in the region is China and its People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), an often overlooked player is Russia

In September 2020, the German Government published its Indo Pazifik Guidelines emphasising its concerns about global supply chains and the security of its maritime trading routes. It further articulates its concerns about an increasing arms race in the region and the deterioration of the rules-based system and good order at sea. While not called a strategy by default, the guidelines are close to a strategic document – at least to German standards and compared to, for example, the German white book published in 2016. In August 2021, Germany jumped its shadow again by sending the frigate FGS Bayern to a seven-month Indo-Pacific deployment underpinning the document with real-world politics. This consistency is remarkable given the society's general reluctance to deploy military forces, and the fact that the Deutsche Marine has only 10 similar ships of various classes, rendering them a scarce commodity with many competing operational demands. While the strategic challenger in the region is China and its People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), an often overlooked player is Russia. Being both a European as well as an Asian nation with an Indo-Pacific coastline, Russia is the strategic linkage that connects a stable and secure Southeast Asia directly to a stable and secure Europe.

Though it is crystal clear that the presence of a single German warship will not alter the force ratio in a western favour, it is nevertheless remarkable. The ongoing discussions about the deployment vary from proclaiming the return of 'Kanonenbootdiplomatie' (gunboat diplomacy) by the political left to "much too less, much too late". The broader public, however, shows little to no interest in the first deployment of a German warship into the region since over 20 years.

This paper examines why the BAYERN deployment is a remarkable step not only for the Deutsche Marine, but also for Germany's foreign and security policy as a whole. It further examines what role Germany could and should play in the future security architecture of the region.

## Finding its Sea Legs again – the Deployment of FGS Bayern

Conducted as an all-national endeavour, the Bayern's deployment moves beyond Germany's reluctance when it comes to the expression of a clear national interest. Bayern's long route into the region leads it across almost every maritime security hotspot of relevance for the western nations. Offering plenty of opportunities to send signals to friends and potential foes alike.

In the Mediterranean, she joined NATO's maritime security mission Sea Guardian – the mission carried out by the NATO standing maritime group. Furthermore, en route she reported into EU's counter-piracy operation Atalanta – the first EU led maritime security operation of the union. The region around the Horn of Africa is not only a maritime security hotspot, it also marks the beginning of out-of-area deployments for the Deutsche Marine with the successful evacuation of German peacekeepers from Somalia during Operation Southern Cross in 1994. Currently, Bayern joined the United Nations' maritime embargo of North Korea. These three examples illustrate the rich opportunities for strategic signalling the journey offers for Germany, marking itself out as a reliable partner for the EU, NATO and the UN alike.<sup>12</sup>

1 Moritz Brake and Sebastian Bruns, "Frigate Bayern in the Pacific: The Return of German Gunboat Diplomacy?" Center for International Maritime Security," accessed December 30, 2021, <https://cimsec.org/frigate-bayern-in-the-pacific-the-return-of-german-gunboat-diplomacy/>

2 The route of the BAYERN and its actions underway can be followed via the interactive "German Navy Fleet Tracker" hosted by the Kiel based "Center for Maritime Strategy & Security" (CMSS): Kiel Seapower Series, "German Navy Fleet Tracker," accessed November 30, 2021, <https://kielseapowerseries.com/en/fleet-tracker.html>

Aside from re-assuring established allies, Germany seeks to deepen and further expand its bilateral relations to southeast Asian nations promoting the second tier of its approach to the region: strengthening regional multilateralism and diversifying its regional partners. Port calls at Yokohama and Ho Chi Minh City are the most prominent expressions, as well as joining regional initiatives like the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).<sup>3</sup>

The prominent AUKUS cooperation highlighted the crucial role Australia plays in the strategic calculus of western nations and Germany is no exemption. With two port calls flanked by a several smaller exercises conducted with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), the country marks a cornerstone on the Bayern's voyage. This is further underlined by the announcement that the German Luftwaffe (Airforce) will participate in an Australian-led combined exercise Pitch Black 22 next year with six Eurofighter fighter aircraft as well as transport and tanker aircraft. Marking the first Luftwaffe deployment into the region ever and underpinning Germany's ambitions to have at least some stakes in a regional security architecture.<sup>4</sup>

## The Rise of the Bear and the Dragon – and how to counter it

Since 2012, when Xi Jinping came into power, the strategic competition between China and the US became increasingly obvious. China invests heavily in military capabilities across the board to challenge the US and its ability to estimate China's strength, ambitions and intentions. Parallel to this, it has intensified "probing behaviour" to test the willingness and capacity of its neighbours, the US but also European states to respond effectively. This kind of behaviour includes its illegal island seizures in the South China Sea (SSC) including the use of its maritime militia camouflaged as "patriotic fisherman" but also the incursion of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) it further seeks to gain economic and thereby political influence into its near abroad, but also within, for instance, Africa, the MENA region and even in South and South-eastern Europe. The PRC's overarching aim is to prevent the states in its periphery, as well as further abroad, from a US-lead gang-up against China.<sup>5</sup>

The Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) plays a crucial role in China's ambitions to reach regional superiority. It underwent an impressive modernisation and build-up for the last twenty-five years, making it the world's largest navy by sheer asset count. While adding more and expeditionary capabilities, the primary goal is to reach superiority on the Southeast Asian theatre, putting China into the position for a successful invasion of Taiwan.<sup>6</sup> To prevent it from

3 "International cooperation to combat piracy: Germany accedes to the international agreement ReCAAP," accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/recaap/2437518>

4 Justin Burke and Johannes Peters, "Naval deployment shows Germany's commitment to the Indo-Pacific," accessed September 28, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/naval-deployment-shows-germanys-commitment-to-the-indo-pacific/> And: "Hochwertübung „Pitch Black 2022“ mit deutscher Beteiligung -," accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.bundeswehr-journal.de/2021/hochwertuebung-pitch-black-2022-mit-deutscher-beteiligung/>

5 Sarah Kirchberger, "Understanding Risk in the Great Competition with China," The Heritage Foundation, accessed November 26, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/topical-essays/understanding-risk-the-great-competition-china>

6 For a detailed analysis of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy see: Sarah Kirchberger, *Assessing China's Naval Power: Technological Innovation, Economic Constraints, and Strategic Implications*, Global Power Shift, Comparative Analysis and Perspectives (Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 2015)

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doing so, and to demonstrate that its probing behaviour has consequences, requires a carrot – and stick policy by Southeast Asian Nations and the West alike. It must be made clear to China's political and military leaders that China has a place in a free and peaceful Indo-Pacific region – if it stops bullying its neighbours and threatening the world. The broader this peacetime deterrence coalition the better, and that is where Europe and Germany can come play a role.

As indicated above, Russia is the strategic linkage for Europe into the Indo-Pacific. The Sino-Russian axis evolved out of necessity. Both heavily affected by western sanctions, China relied on Russia for its military modernisation. Russia, in return, needed Chinese orders to bolster its weak economy. Despite disputes and initial mistrust, this forced partnership evolved into a deep mutual military cooperation covering the whole intensity spectrum including even sensitive areas like intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). This mutual support has a strategic dimension as both states support each other even in areas where there is no obvious strong national interest. Russian fighter jets frequently supported Chinese planes entering disputed airspace between China and Japan around the Senkaku Islands. China supported Russian strategic signalling in the Baltic Sea by sending a naval task group for a combined exercise in 2019.<sup>7,8</sup>

Russia is also crucial for a European role in a broader Indo-Pacific deterrence framework. The main concern of Taiwan and Southeast Asian nations in general is that the US are forced to withdraw forces from the region to support its NATO allies should Russia decide to start a regional conflict in, for example, the Baltic. Already overstretched in peacetime, the US are unable to fight two regional wars at the same time. A Russian incursion on the Baltic States could lead China to do the same with Taiwan materializing on the relative US weakness in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the most significant contribution to stability and security in the Indo-Pacific the EU and European NATO states can make is credible deterrence against Russia on the European theatre and achieving a stronger strategic autonomy from the US without questioning NATO or the transatlantic partnership.<sup>9</sup>

This is particularly relevant in the underwater domain – an area both nations have identified as key to challenge their western counterparts. Modern, state-of-the-art submarines are often considered to be the weapon of choice to counter a superior surface fleet because of their stealth and the fact that sanitizing a certain sea space from a probable submarine threat is a time-consuming effort that binds a significant number of assets. China's massive naval build-up therefore led to a submarine arms race in Southeast Asia. Almost all nations in the area invested or are currently investing heavily into either acquiring submarine capabilities or upgrading their existing fleet.<sup>10</sup> This alters the strategic calculus for all players within the region by offering potential for both new alliances and emerging conflicts.

China's massive naval build-up includes submarine procurement as well. While the mainstay of the PLAN's submarine force is diesel electric, China operates a small fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) and ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) with plans for further growth.

7 Johannes Peters, "Below the Surface: Undersea warfare challenges in the 21st century," in Pawlak; Peters, *From the North Atlantic to the South China Sea*

8 Often overlooked are Russia's manifold military relations with Vietnam and India. There are indications that Russia seeks multipolarity in Southeast Asia to remain one great power among others in the region. See: Madison Sargeant, "Beyond Beijing: Russia in the Indo-Pacific," *Strife*, December 22, 2021, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.strifeblog.org/2021/12/22/beyond-beijing-russia-in-the-indo-pacific/>

9 James Goldrick, "Allied Maritime Strategy from an Australian Perspective," in Pawlak; Peters, *From the North Atlantic to the South China Sea*

10 Geoffrey Till and Collin Koh Swee Lean, eds., *Naval Modernisation in Southeast Asia, Part Two: Submarine Issues for Small and Medium Navies* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018)

Though current US analysis for 2030 estimates that the conventional submarine (SSK) fleet will remain constant (at 55 boats), China aims to replace the old and noisy *Kilo* and *Song* class SSK by the quiet and capable *Yuan* class SSP, increasing the operational value of its conventional fleet significantly. In parallel, the nuclear fleet will almost double to 13 SSN and 8 SSBN.<sup>11</sup>

The most recent example of the Indo-Pacific sub-boost was the trilateral agreement between the US, the UK and Australia on selling nuclear powered submarines to Australia granting the country access to highly classified nuclear propulsion technology. AUKUS is not only a quantum leap for the RAN in regard of capabilities; it will make Australia the nuclear submarine bridgehead in Southeast Asia for the US. As nuclear-powered boats have a weak spot when operating in shallow waters and confined sea spaces, a broader alliance is needed to deter China and Russia in the underwater domain. This alliance must include Japan and South Korea.<sup>12</sup>

## Europe and Germany's role in an Indo-Pacific security architecture

If the underwater domain is crucial in future naval warfighting, what role can Germany play in an Indo-Pacific undersea deterrence picture given its remote geography? US analyst Frank Hoffman argues that AUKUS may not be enough to establish a sufficient deterrence posture. It should therefore function as a nucleus for a broader alliance to team up in submarine and anti-submarine warfare. A US-lead Center of Excellence for Undersea Warfare (similar to the existing NATO CoEs) located at the Philippines or Perth, for instance, would provide simulator and classroom capacities to educate and train submarine warfare skills. While a complementary sea space in the region would function as a training ground for crews to practice. Such a program could include Japan and South Korea, but also states like India, Taiwan or even Vietnam. Such a CoE would not only lay the foundation for a broad undersea deterrence alliance, but it would also leverage the US position in the strategic competition with China.<sup>13</sup>

Germany is already operating an institution of this type. The internationally renowned Submarine Training Center in Eckernförde is a land-based state of the art training facility able to train and teach all aspects of submarine operations, but also anti-submarine warfare. Given this expertise, Germany could be a valuable advisor in setting up and operating the suggested CoE in Southeast Asia.

Any European naval presence in the region, be it coordinated or single state, can only be symbolic and goes along with weakening the own maritime posture in its near abroad. Nevertheless, it is of value for general or peacetime deterrence by showing commitment, standing in for the rules-based system and good order at sea and flying foreign flags within the region the same way the Chinese do in, for example, the Black Sea or the Baltic. The only way a permanent European naval presence could serve both EU and Indo-Pacific maritime security interests is to widen the scope up to the East African coast where the waters of the Indo-Pacific and the EU merge at the outlet of the Red Sea. It is therefore argued that the major shortfall of the EU operation *Atalanta* is that it was not used to establish a permanent EU naval base in Djibouti at the Horn of Africa. Manned and equipped on a relatively low basis following an agreed rotational scheme

11 Peters, "Below the Surface"

12 James Bosbotinis, "AUKUS Defence trio will grapple with not only the Red Dragon but also the Russian Bear," *Warships International Fleet Review*, no. 11 (2021)

13 Frank G. Hoffman, "Extending that 'Loving Feeling' to Undersea Warfare," *War on the Rocks*, accessed November 30, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/extending-that-loving-feeling/>

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by the member states in peacetime, it would put the EU into the position to quickly react to a regional crisis. In doing so, the EU could be both, a gatekeeper at the southern entrance to the European theatre as well as a maritime security player at the western inlet of the Indo-Pacific.

Beside the military role, there are several other areas where Europe can contribute to general security and stability in Southeast Asia. By joining regional agreements, such as the ReCAAP, these efforts gain more weight and regional multilateralism is strengthened. Antarctica offers a unique opportunity for engagement in the broader region that could feed directly into easing tensions between China and the West with both China and European states operating research bases in Antarctica. Europe should express its strong interest to maintain the continent as a non-militarized area of cooperation, offering a forum for dialogue with China; especially as the Arctic Council remains one<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Europe must establish and maintain a naval, or military, presence in the Indo-Pacific to underpin its value-based foreign policy and to support international law and a rules-based system. Further, such a presence is a clear signal to China, on the one hand, showing that freedom of the seas is a reciprocal value and that European ships have every right to sail these waters. Just like the same rights are granted to the Chinese in the Mediterranean or the Baltic Sea, for example. On the other hand, it sends a signal of support and acceptance to Europe's most important ally, the US, that its strategic shift to Southeast Asia is understood and acknowledged. However such a European presence will look like, it will always be symbolic. Becoming a relevant player in the region therefore requires a comprehensive approach. Economic ties with Asian countries must be strengthened to reduce both. The ASEAN states should be encouraged to deepen their multilateral ties to become a relevant political counterpart to China in the region.

As shown, Russia is the strategic link between Western and far-Eastern security. The most important European contribution to a stable and secure Indo-Pacific is to assume more responsibility for its own security by becoming a relevant security actor with the ability to effectively deter Russia in peacetime. That would allow the US to focus on China, while at the same time remaining the backbone of European security. To do so, European states across the board must commit themselves to the agreed goal of spending 2% of their GDP for defence. Further military cooperation and integration in Europe must also be increased to utilize each states' capabilities in the best possible way. Finally, the EU must agree on a common posture against Russia and its probing behaviour against European states.

Germany, as Europe's largest economy, is a key player here. With its lacking political will to fulfil the 2% goal and its deep-rooted reluctance to accept the military as a tool of foreign policy, it has jeopardized its credibility within NATO more than once. On the other hand, the pending operational clearance for the controversial North Stream 2 pipeline lies in the hands of a German federal agency. As Russia highly depends on the revenues from its energy exports, this provides a strong leverage for the German government against Russia. Unfortunately, the new German coalition government has not set a clear course in the German-Russian relations yet. While the Greens and the Free Democrats favour a more robust Russia policy, chancellor Scholz' Social Democrats are traditionally merely appeasers. Nevertheless, the current developments on the eastern border of Ukraine demonstrates once more that peace and stability cannot be taken for granted. Time is a luxury that is not easily afforded in foreign policy.

<sup>14</sup> Goldrick, "Allied"

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