



Global Power Shifts

Security Policy in the Indo-Pacific

How Can Germany Turn its Words into Deeds?

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In its new “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific”, the German government commits to assuming greater responsibility for foreign policy to address shifts in the global balance of power and regional challenges. But what exactly could an ambitious Indo-Pacific policy look like? And what does the region expect of Germany? An analysis based on the examples of India, Japan, and Singapore.

Response to Global Power Shifts

With the “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific” adopted in September 2020, the Federal Government is opening a new chapter in its foreign policy. Germany leaves no doubt that it recognises the importance of this most dynamic of world regions. The wording is also important here: Germany has not published a “strategy” leading to a specific result. Rather, the guidelines state that Germany’s actions will be determined by seven clearly defined, whole-of-government principles: European action, multilateralism, the rules-based order, the United Nations Development Goals, human rights, inclusivity, and a partnership among equals.¹ This provides the basis for the Federal Government’s commitment to closer cooperation with countries within the Indo-Pacific region.

The “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific” provide a concept for responding to shifts in global power. Firstly, the willingness of the United States to work with Europe and other partners to preserve the rules-based order has decreased sharply over recent years. At the same time, an increasingly belligerent China exerts growing influence on international organisations, creates political dependencies, and strengthens its power projection capabilities in strategic territories such as the South China Sea. In light of these developments, Germany and Europe cannot limit themselves to the role of mere commenting observers. With its guidelines, the German government seeks to establish itself as an influential player and to uphold the interests of Germany, Europe, but also of its partners in the region.

There is broad consensus that Germany, as an exporting country, depends on a functioning, secure network of global trade routes. The special importance of the Indian and Pacific Oceans for this network is also an established fact. Yet, whereas Germany has made a name for itself as a strong economic and (to a lesser extent) diplomatic partner to Asian countries, Germany – and the European Union – still only make a modest contribution in terms of security cooperation. This discrepancy has not escaped the attention of the region’s representatives, who are increasingly voicing their concerns.

It is hardly surprising that the Indo-Pacific countries have generally responded positively to the announcement of increased German engagement. However, an initial survey of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has revealed that the guidelines were viewed as being only “moderately courageous”.² Through the decidedly inclusive approach of the guidelines, which entails China’s role as a partner as well as a challenger, Germany wants to take a stance against the formation of bipolar structures. Having said that, the reaction of the region’s media makes it clear that the guidelines are viewed as an attempt to contain the rise of China and its influence in the region. Indeed, one publication even called it the end of Germany’s “honeymoon” with China.³ The region’s greatest expectations of Germany are in foreign policy and security. The country may have less weight than Australia or the US when it comes to security policy in the region and cannot and does not wish to act as a military counterpart to Chinese aggression, but the Indo-Pacific countries still value Germany as a neutral partner in the great power tussle.

By using India, Japan, and Singapore as case studies, we will highlight what can be expected of Germany and how the Federal Government could work with these three partner countries to consolidate its role as a security policy player. In conclusion, we will consider the possibility of a common European approach to security policy in the Indo-Pacific.

Challenges for Three “Like-Minded” Countries

India, Japan, and Singapore are often loosely categorised as countries that share Germany’s values,⁴ although their political, economic, and security conditions are quite different and they represent the three different sub-regions: East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. The concept of a partnership based on shared values refers less to the comparability of political systems, which is difficult particularly in the case of Singapore but also India; but rather, it refers to a shared view of a rules-based multipolar world order in terms of economic and security issues. Despite a certain degree of political concordance, Germany’s work with its partners in the Indo-Pacific cannot be compared to the close cooperation existing within the transatlantic defence alliance, NATO.

Singapore, Japan, and India face two major challenges: non-conventional security threats such as environmental disasters, cybercrime and terrorism, and China’s path of confrontation.

China is clearly the bull in the Indo-Pacific china shop. The conflict between the US and China has exacerbated existing tensions across Asia; territorial disputes on land and at sea are challenging the rules-based world order – and multilateral organisations such as the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) are being undermined by China’s “divide et impera” strategy and disunity among its members.⁵

India is facing a growing Chinese presence both along its northern borders in the Himalayas and in the Indian Ocean. In summer 2020, this escalated into the most serious and violent clashes in

recent years. China is also gradually penetrating India’s neighbourhood with its Belt and Road Initiative and lending its support to Pakistan: New Delhi’s main adversary.

Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region is multi-layered.

Indian analysts are also concerned about the closer ties developing between China and Russia, and the possibility of a new bloc forming on the Eurasian continent.⁶ Meanwhile, Japan also expects its relations with China to worsen in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in a discussion with German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, her Japanese colleague Nobuo Kishi emphasised how Beijing is continuing to expand its military capacities, while other countries are having to focus on fighting the pandemic.⁷ For Japanese foreign policy, economic and security challenges are therefore increasingly merging.⁸ In the city-state of Singapore, China is significantly expanding its soft power influence within ethnic Chinese communities so as to sway political public opinion, and neutralise potential critics. On the whole, Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region is multi-layered – targeted diplomatic pressure is creating political and economic constraints, and ramped up military capabilities often enable China to assert itself in acute conflict situations.⁹

On top of this, there are unconventional security threats such as ethnic and religious radicalisation and terrorism, as well as threats posed by cyberattacks, climate change, and natural disasters, which are a particular danger for Asia’s megacities and coastal areas.¹⁰ In India, we are currently witnessing how urgent it is to implement preventative policies against pollution, the destruction of ecosystems, but also to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, many of which are caused by climate change.

Against this backdrop and considering these varying expectations, Germany is pursuing a

differentiated approach to its security cooperation with these three countries in the areas of armaments cooperation, maritime security, and cybersecurity.

India's Potential Requires Stronger Commitment

India and Germany are bound by a strategic partnership explicitly based on democratic values, free and fair trade, and a rules-based order.¹¹ The two countries meet regularly for intergovernmental consultations, with Germany being keen to inject fresh momentum into the currently suspended negotiations on a free trade agreement between India and the European Union.¹² However, security policy has tended to play a subordinate role in bilateral relations to date. Indian experts concede that there have so far been few overlaps in the direct strategic interests. However, there is also a widespread feeling in New Delhi that German foreign policy has focused too much on China while neglecting the challenges faced by India.¹³

Since 2006, defence cooperation between India and Germany has been based on a cooperation agreement that was expanded to include an implementation agreement at a ministerial meeting in early 2019. The aim of this agreement is to establish closer ties between the two countries' armed forces, particularly with respect to collaboration in the field of armaments.¹⁴ In fact, India is showing an interest in products made in Germany: ThyssenKrupp is currently involved in the procurement process for six submarines for the Indian Navy and consideration is being given to equipping Indian-built tanks with German engines.¹⁵ A programme has also been developed to allow Indian officers to take part in Bundeswehr training courses in Germany; and a slight increase in capacity is planned in this respect.¹⁶

However, the Indo-German defence cooperation is still limited and in need of expansion. The only significant joint exercise by the two navies was held in the Arabian Sea in 2008.¹⁷ Training capacity is at a low level and, apart from ad-hoc

high-level dialogues, there are no permanent formats for talks between military personnel. Indian experts also believe Germany falls short with respect to armaments cooperation. For example, France actively promotes its products in India and carefully ascertains demand, whereas Germany is too passive.¹⁸

Indian experts believe that Germany's international influence could above all be brought to bear on securing sea routes.

During the most recent intergovernmental consultations between Germany and India in November 2019, Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Modi identified specific areas for deeper security cooperation, including armaments collaboration, maritime security, and cybersecurity. Indian experts believe that Germany's international influence could above all be brought to bear on securing sea routes as a way of underscoring the two countries' shared interest in upholding the rules-based order. In addition to more intensive and coordinated multilateral diplomacy, physical participation in maritime exercises would also be important in this respect.¹⁹ In addition, India is in particular need of underwater reconnaissance capabilities in the eastern Indian Ocean due to the presence of Chinese submarines.²⁰

On top of the immediate and growing pressures in the maritime sphere, India is facing a myriad of security problems at home, too. Indian experts view the fight against transnational crime and terrorism as an ongoing challenge. It is also important for the subcontinent to promote resilience and draw up contingency plans with it being particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Germany could be an important partner in solving problems of an international nature; however, India believes it has so far been too reticent in deploying its resources.

Japan Wants a More Visible German Presence

As export-oriented nations, Japan and Germany both have a keen interest in preserving the rules-based international order. Along with

its strained relations with Beijing, Japan faces an ongoing threat from North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. Tokyo sees this as an enormous threat to the security and stability of the international community and insists upon



united action against North Korea. This is one of the reasons why the Japanese Ministry of Defence has created areas of competence to meet novel security challenges, such as cyberattacks, electromagnetic weapon systems, and space warfare.²¹

Relations between Germany and Japan have always been predominantly economic. Their role in the Second World War has resulted in both countries exercising restraint when it comes to active military engagement. However, Berlin and Tokyo agree that the rules-based order is a global asset that needs to be actively protected. This includes resolving conflicts between nations via the designated international institutions, and not unilaterally by force. To counter such behaviour, Japan and Germany have announced increased security cooperation to advocate the principles set out in Germany's "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific".²²

Germany and Japan have already worked together on security issues in the past within the framework of multilateral forums. The Japanese Navy is cooperating with the EU's Operation Atalanta in the Indian Ocean to fight against piracy in the region. What is more, the two countries have been involved in joint UN peace missions and worked together within the OSCE and NATO. NATO counts Japan as one of its "partners across the globe" with their alliance having been intensified since 2014 through an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme.²³

Within the European Union, the UK was Japan's key political partner for many years.²⁴ Now that Britain has left the EU, all indications suggest that Tokyo will gradually shift this relationship in Germany's favour. However, Japanese experts concede that there is an obstacle to a common understanding of foreign policy: Many policymakers in Tokyo believe Germany is too soft on China because of economic considerations and has so far done too little to curb China's encroachments.²⁵

Long before the Federal Government adopted its "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific", Japan placed the concept of a Free and Open

Expandable: Indian experts believe Germany falls short of its potential with respect to armaments cooperation. For example, France actively promotes its products in India and carefully ascertains demand, whereas Germany is too passive. Source: © Shailesh Andrade, Reuters.



Indo-Pacific (FOIP) at the heart of its foreign and security policy. Since then, the Japanese government has taken pains to rally support for this political strategy. The “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific” exhibit many overlaps with Japan’s FOIP approach. However, experts in Tokyo still wish Germany would do even more to present itself as a military ally. Above all, this could be achieved through the physical presence of a German naval unit and by scaling up talks at the highest political level. In light of Japan’s perception of the increased security threat in the Indo-Pacific and Germany’s acknowledgement of this region’s importance, the conditions for strengthening the security component of bilateral cooperation are more favourable than ever before.

Japan should examine ways of supporting Germany and Europe on security issues not directly related to the Indo-Pacific.

There is considerable potential for closer cooperation in three areas. Firstly, both countries could clearly signal their determination to join forces to defend their interests. Even if Germany cannot ultimately exert a substantial influence on the military balance in the Indo-Pacific, the widely anticipated deployment of a German naval unit sends an important political signal that principles should be underpinned with concrete actions.²⁶ Secondly, Germany and Japan could build mutual trust through intensified cooperation on concrete projects. This might include German participation in Japan’s existing support for ASEAN states regarding coastal protection or targeted cooperation against unconventional threats such as cyber warfare and space warfare – areas where Japan is already displaying a strong commitment.²⁷ However, building a sustainable foundation for this cooperation would also require Japan to examine ways of supporting Germany and Europe on security issues not directly related to the Indo-Pacific. Thirdly,

both countries could work together more closely on armaments cooperation and examine opportunities for the joint development of technologies. An important prerequisite for this is the imminent conclusion of the Security of Information Agreement, which some experts believe has been delayed for too long.²⁸

Singapore As a Bastion Against Disinformation

Since 2005, Singapore and Germany have established and formalised a close and trusting security cooperation. A new, enhanced Agreement on Defence Cooperation signed in 2018 took this to a new level and defined current priorities, especially on cybersecurity and hybrid threats.²⁹ Despite the two countries having different priorities and perceptions of immediate threats owing to their geographical distance, which limits the scope of their defence cooperation, they both have a strong interest in maintaining a multilateral, rules-based global order. The enhanced cooperation between Singapore and Germany encompasses both security and foreign policy issues, as confirmed by a joint statement issued by the two foreign ministers in 2018. Here, Germany sees Singapore as the European Union’s central point of contact for the South-East Asia region and within ASEAN.³⁰ These excellent bilateral relations are complemented by high-level political visits.

In the “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific”, Singapore is explicitly mentioned regarding three issues: peace and security, information security, and connectivity. Specifically, the following actions are planned in this respect: the deployment of a German naval liaison officer to the Singapore Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in order to strengthen dialogue with like-minded partners concerning the protection of information and communication systems, along with the establishment of a Regional German Information Centre to counter propaganda and fake news in the region. The European Union’s 2019 free trade agreement with Singapore will foster economic and rules-based ties between the Asian and European trading areas. Germany

will also work more closely with Singapore on key technologies and promote their responsible use.³¹ Apart from the establishment of the Regional German Information Centre and the implementation of the trade agreements, further plans continue to be somewhat vague, however.

Maintaining its defence capabilities and military performance compared to its neighbours is a challenge for Singapore.

In the area of security and defence policy, Exercise Panzer Strike is a joint military exercise that began in 2009. Since then, the exercise has increased its complexity and scale and is held in high esteem by the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen also highlighted the provision of the Oberlausitz Military Training Area (OMTA), pointing out its importance according to a Singapore expert.³² Since OMTA equals approximately one fourth of the size of Singapore, the SAF are provided with a new kind of flexibility to train without space limitations. The eleventh series of Exercise Panzer Strike also featured a bilateral live-firing exercise in March 2019.³³ As the second pillar of the defence cooperation agreement, Germany is a key supplier of defence equipment to Singapore. Most recently, it supplied four 218SG submarines and Leopard 2 tanks, with Singapore being open to working with Germany on additional armaments cooperation. Military recruitment poses a particular problem for Singapore due to demographic trends, so maintaining its defence capabilities and military performance compared to its neighbours is a challenge, particularly as cheaper weapons systems become more readily available.³⁴

Bilateral security relations between Singapore and Germany have intensified over recent years. The city-state views German arms exports and the provision of military training facilities as a

successful bilateral cooperation and alliance in the face of those seeking to overturn the international order. The Regional German Information Centre is primarily a civilian facility, but it could also be set up to throw light on disinformation campaigns and offer alternative narratives. This could be complemented by more in-depth intelligence sharing and confidence-building measures to better evaluate threat situations.

Priorities for German Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region

These three case studies relating to Germany's security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific demonstrate that there are many opportunities for Germany to establish itself as a value-based, trusted partner in the region. In light of Germany's size and global influence, its partners in the region have high expectations – whether regarding stabilising the international order or specific issues such as securing trade routes.

Critics of the “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific” see a risk of Germany becoming a one-stop shop that is expected to be (more) active in every country in the region in all areas, from sustainability over security to digital transformation. The guidelines also contain very few new projects, and their aims are yet to be implemented. But precisely this could also be considered as their strength. They do not set out a rigid, ready-made strategy but instead offer the possibility of redesigning or deepening cooperation depending on the partner countries' needs. What is needed here are small, targeted steps rather than a drastic change of course. The three case studies reveal that the same applies to security policy – only interaction and steady work on a range of projects lead to a qualitative leap forward in the overall picture.

With its existing projects relating to armaments cooperation, joint training, and efforts to share information, Germany still falls short of its partners' expectations. A real *Zeitenwende*³⁵ for Germany's security policy – in the Indo-Pacific but also elsewhere – would have to involve the following steps:



Reliable partnership: Singapore and Germany have established and formalised a close and trusting security cooperation. [Source: © Fabrizio Bensch, Reuters.](#)

- Firstly, the region needs to know more about Germany's interests, capabilities, and projects. Moreover, **discussions on security policy issues** must be intensified and institutionalised, **especially at working level**.
- Secondly, the signal effect of a physical German defence presence can hardly be overestimated; it is vital that Germany fulfils its **promise to deploy a naval unit**, thus sending a visible sign that it upholds a free, open maritime order. This requires appropriate planning regarding procurement and budgeting.
- Thirdly, Germany should seek to conduct **joint military and naval exercises** and explore the possibility of participating as an observer in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) exercises.
- Fourthly, the three countries would like to see a consolidation of existing armaments cooperation and for Germany to more actively pursue its interests in this area.
- Fifth, it is important to significantly increase **cooperation in cybersecurity and information**. The **Regional German Information Centre** in Singapore and the **connectivity partnership** with Japan give grounds for optimism. But even in this area, there is still plenty of scope for German and European narratives in the region. Increased cooperation between intelligence services plays a role here, too.
- Finally, every possibility of cooperation with partner countries in **multilateral forums** should be expanded and supplemented with **bi- and tri-national formats**. A joint meeting of foreign and defence ministers should be held with Japan as part of the **Two-plus-two format**.

These recommendations apply in a similar way to the European Union. At the end of the day, Germany's increased security engagement in the Indo-Pacific region can only have a tangible impact if it is flanked by EU action.

A European Vision for the Indo-Pacific?

Particularly over the last year, discussions about a European “pivot to Asia” have gathered momentum once again. France and Britain have long been active in the region with their overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific and as established maritime security powers. Against this background, the French Ministry of Defence published a security strategy paper on the Indo-Pacific back in 2019.³⁶ Germany’s guidelines followed in September 2020 and the Netherlands published a Policy Memo two months later.³⁷ Germany and the Netherlands focus above all on pursuing their economic interests in the region; they do so by diversifying their trading partners, reducing dependency on China, and strengthening relations with countries with shared values. However, their programmes are broader than that of the French and cover areas such as human rights, rule of law, connectivity, climate change, cultural diplomacy, and multilateralism.

Despite all their differences, the three written concepts as well as the EU’s new Strategic Partnership with ASEAN³⁸ and the joint position of the E3 countries at the United Nations regarding the South China Sea, all bear testimony to a growing unity among European countries with strategic ambitions. Individually, no European nation carries real weight on the global arena. The EU can only credibly assert itself by pooling its capacities and resources and recommitting to common values. Unifying the various Indo-Pacific programmes of Germany, France, and the Netherlands to create a European approach, based on existing European papers such as the EU-China Strategic Outlook from 2019 and the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy (2018), could inject much greater coherence into the EU’s activities across the region. This also applies to smaller member states that do not currently have an agenda in this respect but could bring specific capabilities to the table. Such coordinated security action in the Indo-Pacific would restart the Franco-German engine of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), while proving to their transatlantic partners that they

are willing to share the burden. But this would also mean not having to get involved in moves to form blocs and renewed US-China confrontation.³⁹ Instead, Europe could regain at least a degree of strategic capability in the face of geopolitical power shifts.

—translated from German—

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