



Germany in the Indo-Pacific

Securing Interests Through Partnerships

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As the Indo-Pacific becomes an accepted, if not universally agreed upon, way of thinking about the changing geopolitics in the East, there is a growing need for a larger European and German role in Asia and its waters. Amidst the rise of China, the new assertiveness of Russia, and the increasing uncertainty surrounding the traditional American alliances, Europe and Germany must necessarily pick up a greater share of the burden of maintaining a rules-based order in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, as well as secure their own interests. Europe and Germany certainly cannot be a substitute to the extraordinary weight that the US has brought to the East over the last century. Nor can they act unilaterally. But Europe and Germany can help shape the regional order in partnership with countries like Australia, India, and Japan.

Introduction

The idea of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical construct has gained new salience over the last year and more, especially with China's increasing assertiveness across the region. There is a growing consensus on its value in understanding the new strategic dynamics of the region, even if there are naturally differing views on its geographic scope. The US tend to see the Indo-Pacific as extending from "Hollywood to Bollywood". Japan and India have a wider view of the Indo-Pacific as encompassing the east coast of Africa. Australia and Indonesia approach the Indo-Pacific from their positions as the meeting points of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

In essence, the Indo-Pacific is about describing the new geography produced by the rise of China, India, and more broadly Asia, and their deepening economic integration with Europe. It is also about an appreciation of China and East Asia's growing interests in the Indian Ocean, as well as India's rising stakes in the Western Pacific. In many ways, the Indo-Pacific forces the world to a more integrated view of maritime spaces in the east.

The term Indo-Pacific has also been associated with a new strategy to build security in this vast maritime space. Some prefer "inclusive" and "multilateral" approaches and others see it as a "strategic collaboration" among "like-minded countries". Despite claims by some, that the Indo-Pacific is about "containing China", in reality, few countries in the region believe that this is either possible or desirable. Most countries in the Indo-Pacific have high stakes in the economic cooperation with China, but many are also deeply concerned about Beijing's political unilateralism, predatory economics, and intervention in the internal affairs of other states. What the region wants, is a balance that would encourage China to play by the rules, to everyone's benefit.

German Interests

Germany has vital interests in the Indo-Pacific region that are under increasing threat. We believe that China's challenges to the regional and international order may present even greater risks to Germany than the challenges it currently faces in Eastern Europe. This article proposes a roadmap for Germany's enhanced engagement in the Indo-Pacific to support the international order and regional stability.

As one of the world's greatest trading nations, Germany relies heavily on the Indo-Pacific for its prosperity. Among other things, the latter depends on the security of vital Indo-Pacific sea lanes used for Germany's energy needs and for trade. Underlying this, are the international norms that Germany and others depend upon to guarantee freedom of navigation, trade, and territorial integrity.

But many of these foundations of Germany's prosperity are under increasing threat in the Indo-Pacific. In the South China Sea, China is openly challenging freedom of navigation by claiming large areas of ocean as national territory. It has unilaterally altered the territorial status quo in the South China Sea and refused to accept the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the various legal issues that have arisen in the South China Sea. China has turned disputed rocks and outcrops into artificial islands and constructed military facilities on them. This is a none too subtle statement of its ability to close or restrict trade in international waters, if it so chooses. If unchallenged, there is a real danger that this may lead to the unravelling of The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) – which would have major ramifications across the world.

Just as concerning are some adverse consequences for the region due to China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI). Many developing Indo-Pacific states, who hoped that the BRI would be a road to economic development, have instead found themselves saddled with unfeasible infrastructure and mountains of debt that they will struggle to ever repay. Countries are finding themselves increasingly compromised in dealing with China's ambitions. Some, such as Sri Lanka, are resorting to effectively handing over national territory to China on long-term leases in return for debt relief. Others, like Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Maldives, have questioned the terms of economic engagement with China. Without meaningful and concerted action, this is unlikely to end well.

In Eurasia, Russia is challenging norms as part of a reassertion of traditional spheres of influence. In the Indo-Pacific, China is presenting what may be an even greater challenge to the international order. That these developments are not occurring in Germany's backyard is of no comfort to a country that depends heavily on the international trading system. This is why countries with important interests in the Indo-Pacific and the international order have little choice but to respond to China's challenge and the uncertainties surrounding Washington's willingness to uphold the global order.

Security Cooperation

These imperatives are causing key states with interests in the Indo-Pacific to build new security structures in the region. Some of these evolving arrangements are intended to better enmesh the United States into the region. Others are intended to hedge against a possible reduction of Washington's role. In many cases, these evolving arrangements tend to look different to those in Europe, reflecting the varying needs and traditions of the Indo-Pacific region.

For one thing, cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the security sphere, rarely occurs at the multilateral level. Instead, there is a strong focus on bilateral relationships or small coalitions of like-minded states. Through so-called "minilateral" arrangements, many in trilateral format, major maritime states such as India, Japan, and Australia are finding new ways to cooperate and to build new links with other important regional players such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore.

The Quadrilateral Dialogue among India, Japan, Australia, and the United States is yet another security-related vehicle, although it has a long way to go before it matures and gains traction.

European countries such as France and Britain are also actively building partnerships and presence in the region, including through new bilateral partnerships and minilateral arrangements. France, for example, has been an active sponsor

of the France-India-Australia trilateral partnership that focuses on building maritime security in the Indian Ocean. France is eager to work with India in the Western Indian Ocean and with Australia in the Southern Ocean and with Tokyo and Canberra in the South Pacific.

So what does this mean for Germany and its role in the Indo-Pacific? Given its interests in the region, Germany will likely find itself increasingly involved in the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific – whether it chooses to or not.

Germany’s initial instincts may be to avoid any security entanglements. The preference is multilateral engagement – working through the EU and NATO. But the utility of multilateralism appears quite limited in the Indo-Pacific. The region’s traditions and history mean that multilateral groupings are weak and may become even weaker. China’s assertiveness has put pressure on those institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) that have emerged in recent decades. Whatever its value elsewhere, multilateralism may not be the answer to the Indo-Pacific’s problems.

This is why we argue, that Germany needs to overcome its reluctance to contribute to international security. It must move beyond its traditional comfort zone and engage with the region both directly and through the European Union. This will need to occur on several different levels.

Elements of a German Approach

As a first step, Germany needs to prioritise its relationships with key like-minded partners in the region. Like Germany, countries such as India, Australia, and Japan have strong interests in upholding democracy, freedom of navigation, and other international norms. Just as importantly, those countries have the material capabilities and willingness to act when necessary. By better plugging itself into relationships with these countries, Germany will find a much easier path to broader engagement in the region.

Germany can help address the many challenges faced by the Indo-Pacific region in several ways. One area, where Germany could really play to its strengths, is its expertise in infrastructure. As noted above, many Indo-Pacific countries have a pressing need for connectivity infrastructure as a foundation for economic development. Unfortunately, China’s BRI is threatening to overwhelm the region with debt and economically unfeasible projects. The region needs alternatives.

In recent years, Japan has demonstrated a strong financial and moral commitment to building infrastructure across the region in a transparent and economically sustainable way that does not burden host countries with undue debt. Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy (which has recently been adopted by the United States) serves as a useful framework for providing alternatives to the BRI to developing countries in the region.

Germany should consider how it, too, might promote its own version of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy, potentially in cooperation with like-minded partners such as Japan, India, the United States, and Australia. The EU’s recent Connectivity Strategy may be a useful starting point for this, but Germany should also consider how it can engage in infrastructure projects directly.

Another important contribution that Germany could make to regional security is providing capacity building for maritime security. The Indian Ocean is one of the least-governed maritime spaces on earth. But at the same time, many countries and communities in the Indo-Pacific rely heavily on the ocean for their economic wellbeing. However, most lack the capacity to address threats such as illegal fishing and the abundance of other maritime security issues faced in the region.

The failure to properly address these challenges can have important consequences. For example, the illegal pillaging (mostly by Europeans) of Somalia’s rich fishing grounds more than a decade ago put local communities out of business

and was one of the key causes of the rise of Somali piracy. In turn, the threat of piracy led to the militarisation of the Western Indian Ocean, as the navies from many extra-regional states rushed to provide security. Several navies, including the Chinese Navy, are now there to stay, with significant strategic repercussions. This was an important lesson in the costs and consequences of allowing maritime security threats to go unaddressed.

Maritime capability building can be a useful way of establishing regional security relationships. For several years, Japan has worked closely with countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka to improve their capabilities for self-help. This has not only included equipment, but more importantly the provision of training and institution-building. This has been a successful way of establishing Japan's reputation across the region as a constructive and reliable security partner.

Germany, too, has an opportunity to make an important contribution in this area. Indonesia, for example, is a large country that is heavily dependent on fishing and other maritime industries. Yet, it is unable to properly police its waters against illegal fishers from China and other countries. The development of stronger and more capable maritime enforcement capabilities would be a major deterrent to illegal fishers and an important contribution to Indonesia's prosperity.

Last and by no means least, Germany's regional partners will want to see the German flag in the region – one way or another. The German Navy has participated in the EU's Operation Atalanta in the Western Indian Ocean for a long time. But Germany's regional presence needs to be expanded eastward towards Southeast Asia.

Over the last few years, France and Britain have resumed regular substantial naval deployments to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, both separately and together. Earlier in 2018, the French-led *Jeanne d'Arc* naval task force (which included a British helicopter detachment) was deployed to the region for five months. This was an important

demonstration of Europe's interests in the region. Future task force deployments will likely include British ships.

In the future, Germany's European partners will possibly expect a meaningful contribution from the German Navy. This could mean that Berlin might have to find innovative ways to fly the German flag, given the constraints and problems currently faced by the German Navy. Berlin needs to find ways to show its willingness to stand beside its partners to uphold the rule of law in an increasingly uncertain world. For Germany, it can no longer be business as usual in the Indo-Pacific.

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