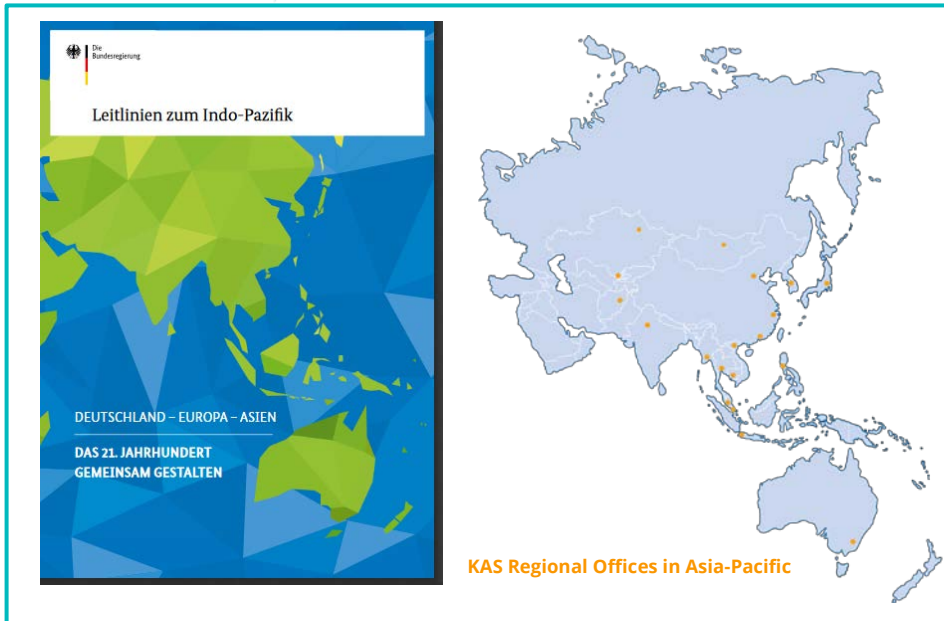


November 2020



A German Pivot to Indo-Pacific?

Opinions from the region on the Indo-Pacific Guidelines of the German Government

Lewe Paul, Alina Reiß, Barbara Völkl, Isabel Weininger

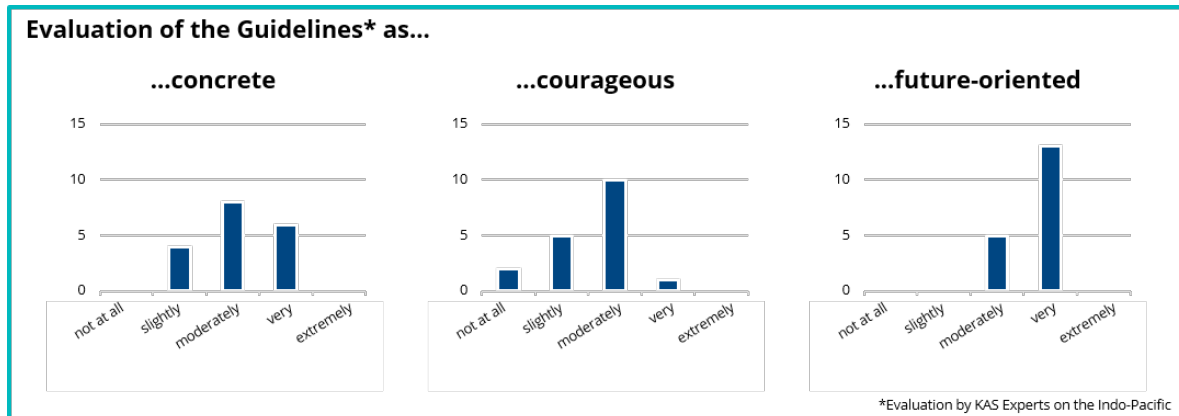
Under the title "Germany - Europe - Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together", the German government published the first Indo-Pacific Guidelines in September 2020. Could this be an indication of a greater shift of German foreign policy towards Asia-Pacific? We conducted a survey among the KAS offices in the region on how Germany's foreign policy commitment has been received¹. This report summarises the reactions from the Indo-Pacific nations and analyses the potential for the design of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between Germany and its partner countries.

An eye on the Indo-Pacific

With the new Guidelines, the German government is responding to the increasing geostrategic importance of the Indo-Pacific nations. The Guidelines clearly state Germany's desire to diversify relations with the region both in geographic and thematic terms. The German government buys a stake in shaping the relatively new political concept of the Indo-Pacific - not least in response to growing demands from the region for greater German involvement². Established partnerships, including those with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Germany's "value partners" in the region create the framework for more intensive multilateral cooperation: in environmental and climate protection; security, human rights and the rule of law; in the deepening of economic relations, free trade and the digital transformation; but also in culture, education and science. In this way, Germany reiterates its backing of the international rule-based order. It seems likely that the Guidelines will provide the basis for an EU strategy.

The Guidelines were released at a noteworthy time: at the beginning of the German EU Council Presidency and shortly after the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Berlin. So far, Germany is the only European country besides France to have published a strategy paper on the Indo-Pacific.

Fig. 1: Solid basis for future cooperation.

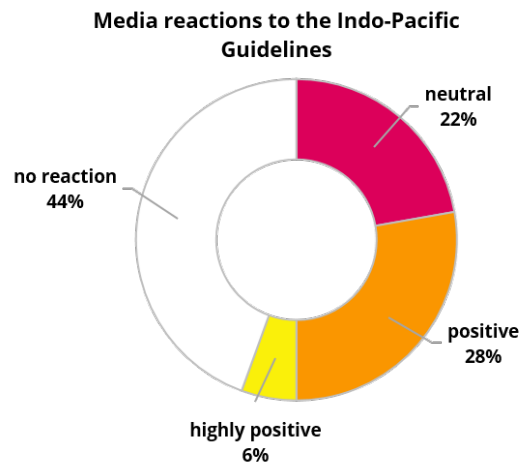


The KAS regional offices unanimously perceive the Guidelines **as future-oriented and sustainable**. At the same time, most resident representatives view the Guidelines as only **moderately or not courageous**. The KAS regional offices also do not expect major changes in the cooperation between Germany or the EU and the Indo-Pacific partners. Yet they emphasised that the strategy paper articulates **concrete and clear policy statements**. The KAS offices, along with the German Embassies and Chambers of Commerce, overwhelmingly see themselves as outreach platforms for Germany’s Indo-Pacific engagement and cooperate closely with the respective political decision-makers.

Let actions speak: cautious optimism in the region

In the countries surveyed, the Guidelines did not generate strong media attention immediately after their release – the timing of publication during **challenges related to Covid-19** and the initial availability of the Guidelines **exclusively in German** certainly had an unfavourable influence on their reception.

The Guidelines were viewed as **generally positive**, especially by the countries often referred to as "value partners", Australia, India, Japan and New Zealand, but also in ASEAN countries such as Singapore and Thailand, as well as in Taiwan. They are perceived as a contribution to strengthening **rule-based multilateralism, bilateral relations** and as a **stance against China**.



Reactions in politics, diplomacy as well as in the academic world are predominantly, if cautiously, positive. The Guidelines are seen as a step in the right direction, whose **concrete implementation remains to be seen**, especially in the area of (maritime) security and in terms of their integration into a **comprehensive European strategy**.

A different picture emerges with the People's Republic of China, which generally sees the paper as a German attempt **"to limit China's rise and its role in the region"**³. While official Chinese media remained silent, the Japanese newspaper Nikkei Asia highlighted the Guidelines as "the end of the German honeymoon with China"⁴.

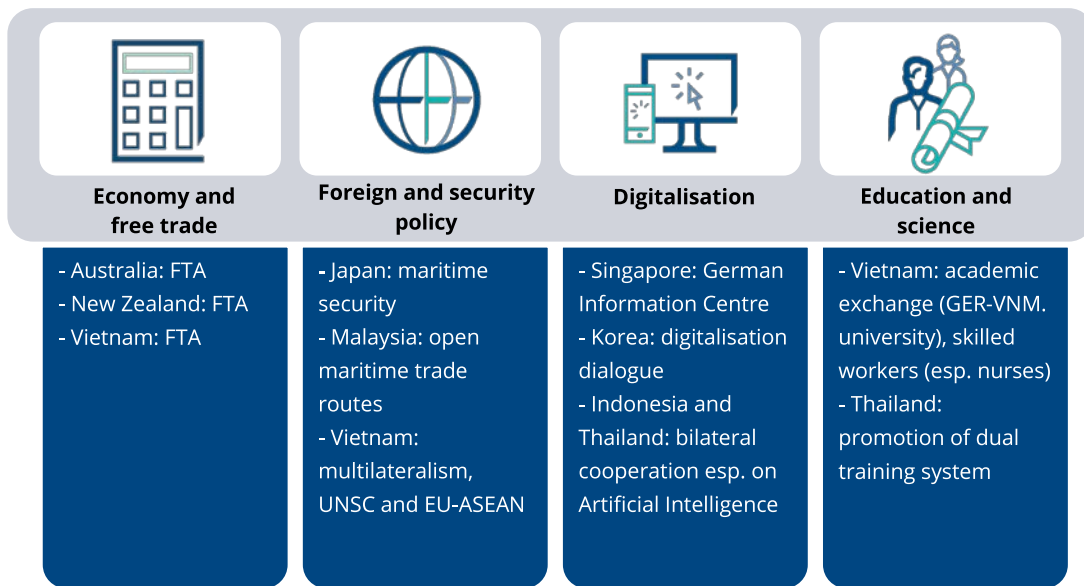
Avenues for strengthened cooperation all around

German and regional media emphasise that Germany for the **first time has a "strategy"** for the region aiming at balanced partnerships and economic growth. Nevertheless, partners are hesitant as to whether this should be considered a **significant change** for the cooperation between Germany and the Indo-Pacific partners.

Despite these reservations, the survey showed that **cooperation could be strengthened** in almost all priority areas, with **business and free trade** taking first place, followed by **culture, education and science**. **Environmental protection and climate change, multilateralism** and **digital transformation** rank third on the list of priorities.

Germany also plans to strengthen its soft power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, notably through the planned German Information Centre in Singapore.

Fig. 2: Selected priorities and flagship projects of German cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners.



It should be highlighted that those surveyed hardly expect Germany to become more involved in the **security and defence** sector. Although some experts described a stronger NATO involvement in the Indo-Pacific region as desirable, they considered such a development unrealistic. The question of a stronger role for NATO in the Indo-Pacific generated a mixed bag of responses.

Info box

NATO and the Indo-Pacific

Whereas Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Korea would view a stronger engagement and deeper cooperation with NATO in a very positive light, India and Vietnam give cautiously positive responses at best. Australia and New Zealand are firmly committed to closer cooperation with NATO, particularly in the areas of maritime security and the fight against terrorism and extremism. Some voices in South Korea are in favour of opening a NATO liaison office; Seoul generally expects NATO to become more active in the region. With India having concluded military cooperation agreements with France and the United States, New Delhi becomes more open on the idea of NATO being active in the region - partly because of the growing threat emanating from its Chinese neighbour. Some Vietnamese interlocutors are also in favour of an increased military engagement of individual NATO states as a deterrent against China. Opinions from Singapore, Indonesia and The Philippines were rather neutral. China, Myanmar and Cambodia voice criticism or suspicions in this regard, with Cambodia now firmly placed within the Chinese sphere of influence. China perceives the US-led NATO as detrimental to its own interests. Taiwan is increasingly exposed to Chinese political and military pressure due to its dependence on the US defence capacities. There is thus robust support for a stronger integration of NATO in security policy.

In addition to NATO itself, its "**Partners Across The Globe**", which include Australia, South Korea and New Zealand, as well as "**QUAD Plus**" and increased bilateral and multilateral formats such as ASEAN and the UN were identified as alternative platforms for cooperation. However, just as in the case of an increased NATO involvement, the different and partly distinct positions of the individual countries in the region are clearly evident.

Multi-level approach: KAS' commitment in the Indo-Pacific

For the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation it is no question that the Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific will shape German foreign policy in Asia-Pacific in the medium to long term. KAS shares the integrative approach of the German government by focusing on regional projects in its Indo-Pacific engagement. The foundation is already active across a broad thematic spectrum and maintains an extensive network. Thematically, the KAS regional offices see their expertise primarily in the areas of multilateralism, security, economy and free trade, and digital transformation. In order to strengthen German cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, the KAS regional offices plan to create bespoke dialogue formats for specific topics and target groups.

The survey furthermore made a strong case that German engagement should go beyond cooperation at the government level. It must also attract attention in the public arena to permeate the region and develop its own dynamics. Projects such as the envisaged Germany Centre in Singapore should help to present Germany as a reliable partner, equipped with concrete projects and initiatives, to the entire region. Here KAS is in a good position to make German commitment visible through its offices abroad.

The partner countries demand significantly more German activities in their region. It is Germany's turn to expand its existing initiatives with the necessary boldness and visibility.

¹ This article is based on a survey in October 2020 with contributions by the KAS offices: Rabea Brauer (Japan), Dr. Céline Caro (Thailand), Christian Echle (Singapore), Miriam Fischer (Malaysia), Peter Girke (Vietnam), Dr. Beatrice Gorawantschy (Australia and New Zealand), Dr. Christian Hübner (Hongkong), Prof. Dr. Stefan Jost (Philippines), Dr. Thomas Knirsch (Myanmar), Peter Rimmel (India), Stefan Samse (Singapore), Dr. Daniel Schmücking (Cambodia), Jan Senkyr (Indonesia), Michael Winzer (China), Thomas Yoshimura (Korea) und David Merkle (Desk Officer China, Berlin).

² The concept of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct for the new strategic dynamics of the region has taken on a new significance in recent years. In Japan, Australia, India and the United States in particular, the term has acquired political salience, although views on its geographical definition differ. For a detailed analysis of the concept see also <https://bit.ly/3eLxvCe>.

³ Translated quote by Michael Winzer, KAS-office Beijing

⁴ Jun Ishikawa (2020): Germany ends China honeymoon with new Indo-Pacific strategy. Available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Germany-ends-China-honeymoon-with-new-Indo-Pacific-strategy>

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Lewe Paul, Alina Reiß, Barbara Völkl and Isabel Weininger
Asia-Pacific Department
European and International Cooperation
www.kas.de
asien@kas.de



Der Text dieses Werkes ist lizenziert unter den Bedingungen von „Creative Commons Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 international“, CC BY-SA 4.0 (abrufbar unter: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode.de>)