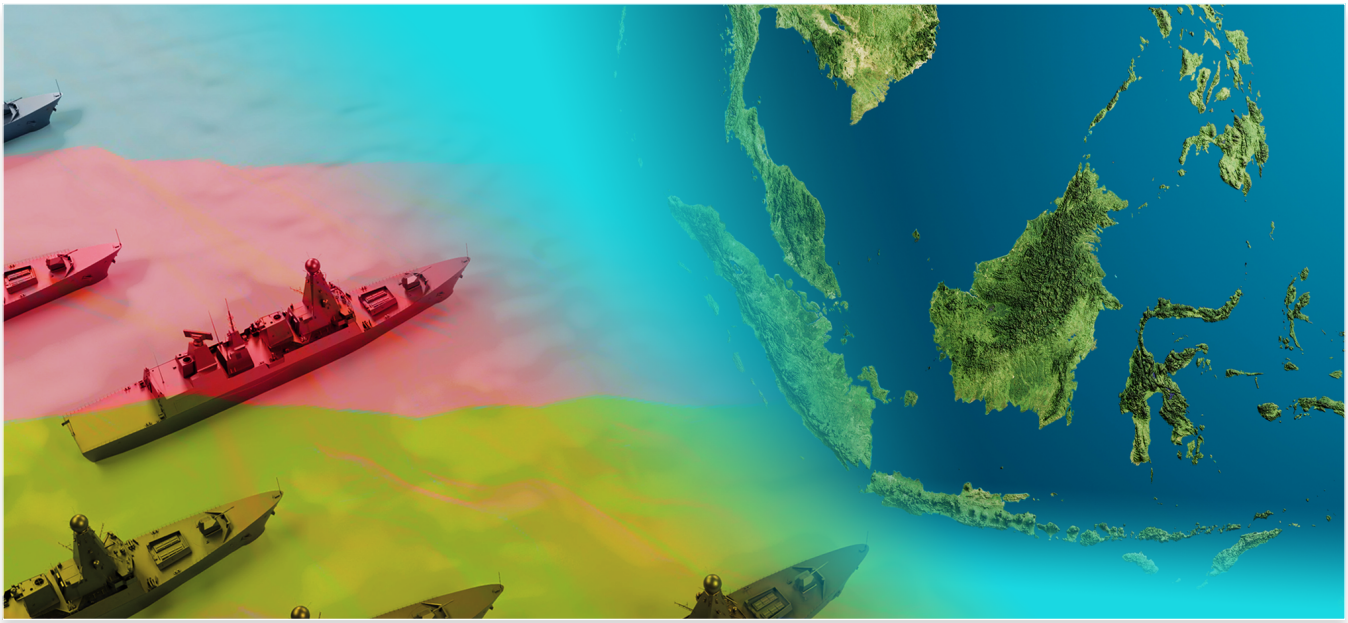
No. 1 / December 2024
Security Blueprint

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG



Recalibrating Germany's Indo-Pacific Strategy:

Strengthening German-Philippine Security Cooperation amid Shifting Regional Dynamics

Juliana Süß and Vanessa Vohs

Executive Summary

Germany published its policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific under the title "Germany - Europe - Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together" in 2020. At the time of writing, the world was still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the guidelines emphasized the importance of free sea trade routes and the respect for a rules-based international order, as well as the need for multilateralism and increased dialogue. While a lot of the tenets of the guidelines are sufficiently universal to still apply – on the significance of free sea routes, for example – the security dynamics of the region have drastically changed in the past four years, necessitating an update to the guidelines. Given the escalating tensions initiated by China in the region, particularly in the West Philippine Sea, updating these guidelines to keep up to date with increasingly aggressive activities is crucial to counteract geopolitical threats in the region, the consequences of which will extend to Germany, Europe, and the global economy.

With specific relevance to Germany's relationship with the Philippines, three key areas within the guidelines necessitate revision or updating:

1. **Intensifying Defense Cooperation and Military Presence:** strengthening measures to ensure the safety and security of maritime routes in order to prevent conflicts in the region. This includes increasing Germany's military presence and participation in joint maneuvers with regional partners, such as the Philippines.

2. **Strengthening Regional Security Architectures:** enhancing cooperation with regional security frameworks of ASEAN and bolstering the security infrastructure within the Indo-Pacific.

3. **Improving Crisis Management and Capacity Building:** intensifying programs aimed at building crisis management capabilities and enhancing the capacity of regional actors to handle conflicts.

Introduction

The South China Sea has recently drawn increased scrutiny from international observers, particularly as Chinese interests manifest in the form of Chinese vessels engaging in increasingly hostile behavior in the region. As tensions continue to peak, a June 2024 clash near the Second Thomas Shoal between the Chinese Coast Guard and a Filipino resupply boat bound for the Philippines' BRP Sierra Madre saw repeated ramming and damaging of the vessels, as well as the use of weapons that ultimately led to a Filipino soldier losing his thumb.[1] In August 2024, Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels could again be seen colliding near the Sabina Shoal.[2] It is evident that the trend is one of further aggression and escalation. Furthermore, Beijing's influence campaigns in the Philippines are continuing, taking on the form of coordinated spread of disinformation through social media.[3] Nevertheless, incumbent Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and the Philippine Government continue to uphold the approach of no territorial surrender, no escalation, and a focus on peace, and efforts such as the West Philippine Sea transparency initiative are supporting the policies.

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific has increasingly become a matter of policy for Western states, particularly European Union (EU) Member States, as they have a vested interest in the continuation of trade routes in the area. Furthermore, as it seems that tensions in the area are increasing, there is an interest in maintaining the international rules-based order. France was the first to publish its strategy in 2019, with an obvious interest due to its overseas territories in the region, such as Mayotte and French Polynesia. Germany followed not long after with official guidelines published in 2020 and yearly progress reports since then – the latest and fourth progress report came out in September 2024. Germany values its global role as part of alliances such as NATO and the EU, with the latter having published its own Indo-Pacific strategy at the beginning of 2024.

Germany's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific

Germany's interests in the Indo-Pacific are clear. There is evident interest in the continuity of free trade routes, but also the trends of instability in the region make it an area of concern that threatens the international law-based order, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The German policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific from 2020 include chapters on climate change, trade, and education. Particularly in the chapter on peace and security, the document clearly states Germany's interest in the region's security, framing it as a matter of prosperity for Europe due to the trade routes present in the Indo-Pacific. It cites that Germany joined the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2020, thereby committing to a peaceful resolution and dialogue in Southeast Asia. The North Korean nuclear arsenal, territorial disputes and conflicts around natural resources, as well as the increasingly tense relationship between the United States and China are also named as risks and threats to stability. The guidelines advocate for a peaceful and cooperative resolution in the face of territorial claims that are based on rules. Tellingly, the South China Sea Arbitration Ruling from 2016 – the verdict of which ruled in favor of the Philippines and stated that Chinese activities in Philippine waters were unlawful, despite China's claims that the ruling was invalid – is also mentioned in the 2020 policy guidelines, while making the point that the verdict is lawful and must be upheld.

While Germany supported the creation of a code of conduct between China and the ASEAN states for the South China Sea in the first set of guidelines released in 2020, this approach is missing entirely from the subsequently published progress report on the guidelines, which was released in September 2024. This may be taken to indicate a feeling of disillusion with China's intention with the document, as has been voiced by the Philippines.[4]

The 2020 guidelines are quite clear in their wording that China, as a nuclear power and a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), needs to take responsibility and be open to transparency and verification mechanisms. Worries over new technologies and their potential impact given the unstable dynamics have also brought about the 'Capturing technology, rethinking arms control' initiative by Germany, which focuses on new technologies in the areas of AI, cyber, space, and missile technologies. Germany's Missile Dialogue Initiative has also chosen the Indo-Pacific as its first geographical focus area. In addition, both arms control and the need for export controls are mentioned in the chapter, as well as the need to help smaller nations be able to support themselves through the *"Ertüchtigungsinitiative"* ("training initiative").

The Indo-Pacific guidelines are not the only document that Germany has published on the region and specifically on the tensions around the South China Sea. Germany's China strategy, published in 2023, describes the situation in the South China Sea as 'tense' and says that it calls on China to honor its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).[5] It further states that it will support the rights granted to states under the Convention and reinforce those rules by way of patrol missions.

Furthermore, Germany's plans to expand its security and defense cooperation with partners in the region – including through further exercises and other forms of maritime presence in the region as they were declared in the documents – were followed through. The German frigate Bayern traveled the region from August 2021 to February 2022, and the frigate Baden-Wuerttemberg and its replenishment ship visited Manila in September 2024 as part of its Indo-Pacific deployment. During this recent visit, the German Navy transited the contentious Taiwan Strait, prompting China to accuse Germany of sending 'wrong signals' that could heighten security risks in the region.[6]

While Germany's guidelines give an indication as to the path forward, a strategy would be apt to cement the German Government's commitment to its interests in the region and reassure its allies, including the Philippines, especially as the Indo-Pacific gains strategic importance and as the risk of escalation continues to grow due to recent events. The strategy should clearly outline Germany's interests and communicate a vision of future collaboration and activities in the area to which future actions can be anchored. A strategy should also clearly align means with ends, which is currently lacking in the existing guidelines. It is crucial for the strategy to take stock of where Germany can assist. This action must include a realistic assessment of the requirements, ideally with states like the Philippines to gauge what is needed, and an equally realistic stocktake of what Germany can offer. Germany's legal expertise, which means it is held in high regard also on a multilateral level, could be an advantage here as much as its economic prowess. The close economic relations between China and Germany could also be an advantage in diplomatic negotiations and mediations further down the line. Germany's rhetoric with regard to China has always been firm but balanced, which is unlike the increasingly hawkish linguistics used by the United States. Despite the tone of exchanges cooling during the Biden Administration, the policies largely held firm – and even President Joe Biden's choice of words firmed up with specific incidents, such as the Chinese spy balloon that was shot down over U.S. territory.[7] Hence, Germany should find it easier to step in as a trusted arbitrator.

Moreover, given the escalating tensions initiated by China in the region, including in the West Philippine Sea, updating Germany's guidelines on the Indo-Pacific and China to keep up to date with increasingly aggressive activities is crucial to counteract geopolitical threats in the region, the consequences of which will extend to Germany, Europe, and the global economy.

In this regard, three key areas within the guidelines, with specific relevance to Germany's relationship with the Philippines, necessitate revision or updating.

1. Intensifying Defense Cooperation and Military Presence

The guidelines emphasize the importance of free sea trade routes and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, which is especially important for Germany due to its increasing trade volume in the region. What sounds rather neutral in 2020 sees a language change in the fourth progress report published in 2024, which makes it clear that it was China's expansive maritime activities that are increasing tensions in the region.[8] This not only reflects a progression of relations in the South China Sea but also shows that the German Government is taking a clearer stance. The progress report further details that partners should be better equipped and supported in matters of maritime security. Still, the document remains vague and does not go into further details as to what capabilities would be of use. A detailed discussion on the vulnerabilities and current capability gaps of partners, such as the Philippines, would be useful to determine how supporters such as Germany can be of assistance. Support can take various forms, including physical assets like vessels and equipment such as radios and radar, all the way to training of Coast Guard personnel. As Germany acts within an alliance of partners who are working on the Indo-Pacific, it would make sense to discuss in detail who is able to provide support, in what capacity, and at what time – primarily to avoid duplications and shortfalls. For example, NATO is strengthening its relations with states in the Indo-Pacific and working with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand.[9] Further partnerships, including with smaller states such as the Philippines, could be mutually beneficial.

A strategy on the Indo-Pacific would further benefit from a clearly articulated position, putting means and ends in relation to one another. The linguistic clarity present in the progress report of 2024 is helpful to Germany's partners, such as the Philippines, who are facing a much larger and more powerful opponent in their territorial waters. The Philippines provides visibility of their encounters with Chinese aggressions, including through the West Philippine Sea transparency initiative.[10] While such initiatives cannot compensate for a wider lack of deterrents or strategies available to combat these incursions, the generated awareness will dash any hopes China may have had that attention over its incursions of Philippine territory will be limited to that part of the world. Further, the documentation of the occurrences can help Western states and alliances hold China accountable. Linguistic clarity around compliance with international maritime law is helpful for allies in the region during the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes. Germany does not need to adopt a stance similar to the Biden administration toward Taiwan, which hints at the use of military force in case of a breach, partly because such wording may not be perceived as credible in the first place. This is why linguistic clarity is important in the context of other measures, such as strengthened regional security architectures.

The guidelines support the expansion of Germany's security policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific, including the maritime domain. This was followed by the German Navy frigate FGS Baden-Württemberg and combat supply ship FGS Frankfurt am Main, which visited the region as part of the Indo-Pacific Deployment of 2024. The deployment included exercises with partners, such as with the Republic of Singapore Navy in early October 2024.[11] The deployment also stopped in Manila, and an exercise with the Philippine Navy was conducted as well. Germany also donated reconnaissance UAVs to the Philippine Coast Guard as part of its aforementioned *"Ertüchtigungsinitiative."*[12]

During the visit of Germany's Defence Minister Boris Pistorius to Manila in August 2024, Germany and the Philippines expressed their intent to sign a broader defense cooperation agreement in order "to expand training and bilateral exchanges, explore opportunities to expand bilateral armaments cooperation and engage in joint projects."[13] This comes after an agreement between Germany and Japan was finalized in

January 2024, which would facilitate a supply of services and supplies between the two countries.[14]

Another crucial player for the region's security is NATO. While it may seem that NATO would be a fitting partner through which Germany and other European countries can support the region more effectively, the Alliance has been largely hesitant to expand its original raison d'etre even though China has appeared in its strategic documents since 2019.[15] The G7 is a forum in which the Indo-Pacific is discussed at length and which uses strong and unequivocal language in the context of the Indo-Pacific, such as pointing out "China's dangerous" behavior in the South China Sea, which is constraining the maritime freedom of navigation of other countries. The Apulia G7 Leaders' Communiqué goes on to call out the behavior against Philippine vessels in particular, stating that "there is no legal basis for China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea, and we oppose China's militarization, and coercive and intimidation activities in the South China Sea."[16]

It is important to take into account that the Indo-Pacific region is home to the nuclear powers India, Pakistan, China, and Russia, as well as North Korea with its nuclear program. The USA, Taiwan, Japan, and China are also intensifying their military strength in the region. However, Germany again does not seem to have a clear strategy on how to address this threat. Although the German Government highlights that its first National Security Strategy, released in 2023, is a continuation of the Indo-Pacific guidelines, the Indo-Pacific is only mentioned once as an important region without further calls for action.

Hence, we recommend increasing Germany's military presence in the region through regular joint maneuvers with regional partners, including the Philippines. This could be accomplished by deploying German naval units to secure critical sea routes and participate in international naval exercises in the South China Sea. Additionally, the inclusion of exchange officers in these efforts would foster greater collaboration and strengthen military ties with partner nations in the region. By learning from each other's training methods and perspectives, both parties can deepen their understanding of Indo-Pacific dynamics. This exchange would foster greater insight into regional security challenges and enhance Germany's ability to effectively engage in the Indo-Pacific.

2. Strengthening Regional Security Architecture

The Federal Government of Germany outlined in its 2020 policy guidelines the intent to strategically enhance its engagement with ASEAN, recognizing the growing significance of the region. As part of this effort, Germany expanded its cooperation with ASEAN institutions and supported the ASEAN Secretariat, aiming to strengthen the institutional framework of the partnership. Furthermore, the Federal Government intended to elevate its relationship with ASEAN by transitioning from a development partnership to a dialogue partnership, reflecting the increasing depth of the collaboration.

At the European level, the Federal Government intended to strengthen the EU's role as a key partner of ASEAN through close cooperation with its EU counterparts. To this end, Germany advocated for the timely upgrading of EU-ASEAN relations to the level of a strategic partnership, underlining the importance of deeper political, economic, and security ties between the regions. Additionally, Germany supported efforts to enhance the EU's security engagement in ASEAN's security forums, ensuring that this engagement is backed by concrete projects that promote regional stability.

One might question whether these goals have progressed or truly been achieved in the last four years at both the national and European levels. Nevertheless, it is noted that Germany has not (yet) achieved

observer status at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) to participate more closely in regional security discussions and build stronger security ties with ASEAN countries. This effort should be strengthened with the goal of Germany finally achieving observer status.

In the same vein, the EU and ASEAN became strategic partners to cooperate in ensuring peace and security in the region, building sustainable connectivity, promoting free and fair trade, and supporting sustainable development in the ASEAN region. Yet, any similar strategic partnership between Germany and ASEAN is missing. Germany only achieved a "Strategic Regional Partnership with Central Asia" in 2023.

Where Germany fell short of its unilateral goals, relations with ASEAN progressed at the multilateral level. The EU published its own EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in January 2024. It focuses on shared areas of interest between the two regions, highlighting focus areas for the German Government, such as ocean governance and security and defense. The document calls for joint naval exercises conducted by EUNAVFOR ATALANTA (European Union Naval Force Operation ATALANTA) with Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Oman, and the US, as well as a coordinated maritime presence in the North-West Indian Ocean. The document also states EU participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum and EU-funded projects, such as CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific) for capacity building and maritime information sharing solutions.[17] CRIMARIO has a budget of €23 million and is set to run until 2025. Under CRIMARIO I, which was created in 2014, the project saw the creation of a platform that allows for coordination, incident management, and training programmes related to data processing.[18] Currently, CRIMARIO II, which will focus on South and Southeast Asia, is set to build on the progress made under CRIMARIO I since 2014. Its objectives are listed as information exchange and analysis related to maritime coordination and crisis management and maritime surveillance, policing, investigation, and judiciary.[19]

As indicated in the fourth progress report on the German Indo-Pacific guidelines, the consequences of the Israel-Hamas war also affect actors in the Indo-Pacific due to attacks by the Houthis on commercial ships in the Red Sea that compromise the security of commercial shipping between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Since Germany is highly export-dependent and more than 90 percent of world trade is conducted by sea, Germany could step up in the region to defend commercial ships. Instead of becoming a lead nation and joining the US-led operation "Prosperity Guardian" in December 2023, it took Germany several months to form the European mission Aspides in order to be present in the Red Sea. If Germany wants to uphold its self-set standards in its Indo-Pacific policy guidelines, it must become more independent of international missions and act with coalitions of the willing in accordance with international law.

3. Improving Crisis Management and Capacity Building

The guidelines emphasize capacity building in export control and strengthening regional cooperation as crucial elements to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Key aspects include fostering resilient structures to address regional crises, enhancing cooperation with Indo-Pacific nations, and supporting civil protection and disaster management. It highlights Germany's role in peacebuilding, institutional strengthening, and conflict prevention, stressing multilateral partnerships and the importance of coordinated global efforts to enhance regional security and stability.

Moreover, multilateral cooperation and diplomacy measures in Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines focus on strengthening ties with regional organizations like ASEAN and enhancing cooperation within international frameworks such as the United Nations. Germany seeks to promote rules-based multilateralism, respect for international law, and stability through diplomatic engagement. It aims to deepen political, economic,

and security cooperation with partners in the region while also supporting initiatives that address global challenges such as climate change and conflict resolution.

Given the current potential for escalations, it is essential to intensify capacity-building and crisis management programs to better prepare affected states for conflict and enhance their conflict resolution capabilities. This could be achieved through specialized training programs and the provision of technical support to the Philippines and other states in need. By offering these resources, states will be better equipped and prepared to manage different scenarios and outcomes (e.g., maritime reconnaissance, how to deal with the increasingly threatening techniques employed by China) and ensure regional stability.

Lastly, the term "rules-based international order" should be revised to "international law-based order" to effectively counter China's lawfare strategies aimed at undermining the established international order based on law. China does also claim to support a "rules-based international order" – however the caveat lies in redefining what these rules are. Therefore, focusing on commonly agreed international legal rules, such as the prohibition on the use of force and respect for national sovereignty, as well as UNCLOS, must be upheld and not redefined. The term international law-based order does not leave room for China to unilaterally redefine international law as those rules must be universally changed by subjects of international law.

Conclusion

Germany's approach to strengthening security cooperation with the Philippines and the broader Indo-Pacific region is both timely and critical. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, particularly with rising tensions in the South China Sea, it is essential for Germany to adapt its standpoint accordingly and formulate a strategy that projects its messages to its competitors and partners in the region. Maritime security can be enhanced by focusing on regional security architectures, defense cooperation, and crisis management. Multilateral diplomacy with willing partners and through effective forums, such as the EU, will be crucial in addressing the challenges posed by aggressive actions in the region. Ultimately, Germany's commitment to an international law-based order will reinforce its position as a credible and reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific, thereby contributing to a more secure and prosperous future for all involved.

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Imprint

The **Security Blueprint** is a series of policy briefs and short articles addressing critical security issues involving the Philippines and the region, authored by KAS security experts and fellows of the Adenauer Security Experts Network Philippines (SeEN PH) Program.

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Publisher
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., 2024, Philippines Office
5/F Cambridge Center Bldg., 108 Tordesillas cor. Gallardo Sts.,
Salcedo Village, Makati City 1227 Philippines
Email: info.manila@kas.de
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