

Indo-Pacific:

Europe's geopolitical ghost ride

Uwe Hoering, April 2021

It may sound like a matter of routine: In the summer of this year, the frigate *Bayern* is about to set sail and spend several months cruising in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. The Federal Defense Ministry merely wants to see this as a "signal": Where Germany's "values and interests are at stake", its flag is to be shown. However, behind this there is a fundamental restructuring of security policy, in other words, a paradigm shift. Europe seeks to "learn the language of power," as former Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen called for in the summer of 2019.¹ And it is a provocation that was immediately answered by Beijing: The pro-government *Global Times* writes sardonically, "if they can come to the South China Sea, we can also go to the Mediterranean".²

Conflict region

The area of operations is one of the most volatile conflict regions in the world. In the dispute over who has control of the so-called South China Sea between China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan, skirmishes between the coast guards of the littoral states have recently been reported with increasing frequency. Just recently, there have been diplomatic tensions because more than 200 "fishing boats," presumably manned by Chinese paramilitary, have been sailing in Philippine waters.

The kick-off for these conflicts was provided by the Chinese government in 2009, when it submitted a map showing the "Nine-dash line", a pretty loose demarcation line with which it backs up territorial claims to 90 per cent of the waters. In addition, it is creating facts by converting rocky reefs and sandbanks into military installations, thus shifting its military outposts against a potential strike by the U.S. and its allies several thousand kilometres to the east. It bluntly rejected the ruling by the International Court of Arbitration in The Hague in the summer of 2016 that its position violates UN law of the sea. This behaviour became an important piece of evidence for the accusation that China is aggressively pursuing "military expansion" and disregarding international law.

The *Bayern* is not all alone: British, French and Dutch naval vessels are also stepping up their presence in the Indo-Pacific in the name of "freedom of navigation." The mighty U.S. Pacific fleet has been engaged in this FONOP-operation for quite some time, engaging in turf wars with the Chinese navy, as it did again at the beginning of April. Chinese and U.S. military circles both call this "pure routine". The deployment of the German Navy is therefore more than just a "sign of solidarity," as current Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer

¹ Sozialismus.aktuell, November 17, 2019.

https://www.sozialismus.de/kommentare_analysen/detail/artikel/kanonenbootpolitik-bis-vor-chinas-haustuer/

² Cui Hongjian, Director Department for European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies. *Global Times*, March 25, 2021

pretends: The German government is thus siding with the confrontational U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific.

The internal and external pressures to join the convoy and to fly the flag in the current Great Game East have been emerging at least since Ursula von der Leyen's tenure, applauded by most of the German media. Last September, the German government adopted "Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific"³, claiming - quote Kramp-Karrenbauer - its "role as a shaping power"⁴ in guaranteeing "peace and security," "open maritime routes and markets," and "free trade" worldwide. Others, such as France and Holland, now have similar strategy papers, while a common EU position is still being worked on. Serious observers, however, doubt that freedom of navigation is actually threatened by China at present - as the most powerful trading nation, it has the strongest interest in this itself.

Economic interests

This commitment is being justified by the increasing global economic significance of the region. The most important trade routes between Asia and Europe run through the Indian Ocean, the Southeast Asian waters and the Western Pacific, around 40 per cent of the EU's foreign trade, including with China, now its second most important trading partner. In addition, the area is also forecast to experience the strongest recovery from the Corona pandemic. Furthermore, the diversification of manufacturing from China, as much a consequence of the trade war with the U.S. as of China's modernization agenda, is expected to further enhance the economic role and importance of neighbouring countries.

Accordingly, European countries and the EU are scrambling to step up their economic and political presence, especially as China has won a major commercial victory on points with the RCEP regional economic agreement. It will create a common economic space of 2.2 billion people with one-third of the world's economic output, involving three of the four leading Asian economies - China, Japan and South Korea - for the first time.

The European *Comprehensive Agreement on Investment*, CAI, was therefore hastily concluded at the end of last year, promoted primarily by the German government. Under the agreement, China agrees to improve access for investors, to reduce asymmetries between European and Chinese companies and to promote the implementation of international agreements such as the Paris Agreement on climate protection, on labour rights and against forced labour. The EU is also stepping up its efforts to expand its bilateral trade relations: Free trade agreements have been concluded with Japan, Singapore and Vietnam, negotiations are underway with Australia, New Zealand and the regional organization ASEAN. Also on the To Do List are the difficult negotiations with the rather stubborn India, which is also being courted by France and by Great Britain, which after the Brexit is now pursuing its global ambitions - some observers would mock: its illusions of a return of the British Empire.

³ <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380500/33f978a9d4f511942c241eb4602086c1/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>

⁴ Sozialismus.aktuell, November 11, 2019

Systemic competition

By now the confrontation in the South China Sea has become one of the arenas of the "systemic rivalry" proclaimed by the U.S. and in the meantime also by the EU, similar to the Corona pandemic, the capture of Hong Kong or the global digitalization. Since the 2008 financial crisis, out of which the U.S. emerged weakened and China strengthened, the U.S. government has responded to China's geopolitical assertiveness in an increasingly confrontational manner, euphemistically referred to under former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton as a "Pivot to Asia". And so far, U.S. President Biden continues Trump's China policy, albeit more conciliatory in tone and embedded in alliances.

Led by the U.S., the armada in which the frigate *Bayern* will participate is supposed to affirm principles like a "rules-based order" and the validity of "shared values" that are declared to be universally valid - and to put China in its place. Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer already compared Beijing's claims in the South China Sea last May with Russia's moves in the Ukraine: "We should assess some events in the Indo-Pacific in the same way," she is quoted as saying by *Handelsblatt*.⁵ Germany and other NATO countries could very well be involved in another 'Out of Area mission'. While 15 years ago the Afghanistan engagement at the Hindu Kush was meant to defend only "Germany's security", now the objective is much broader and grander: "freedom, peace and prosperity".

Escalation

By sending the *Bayern* on a cruise to the East, however, the German government is also sending a very questionable signal - in several ways: It is joining the U.S. in its aggressive containment strategy. At the same time, it is supporting the ambitions of France and Great Britain to resume hegemonic claims that are nourished by their colonial past. President Macron is keen to promote France as an Indo-Pacific power, which included seeking a warm embrace with India's fundamentalist authoritarian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Post-Brexit Britain is also reaching out to the region, with the balancing act of courting India, once the Crown Jewel of the British Empire, and China at the same time. Economic agendas translate into geopolitical expansion, a charge otherwise hurled at China. The connotation of colonial gunboat politics is obvious. There are already predictions of a new Cold War between East and West.

This goes along with an increasing armament of the U.S. and its allies such as Taiwan and Japan, which is countered by Beijing with growing military expenditures as well. Unlike China, the U.S. and the former colonial powers France and Great Britain already have a dense network of military bases in the region. U.S. weapons manufacturers expect a further acceleration of the arms race, which could then also spur German arms exports.

It also includes moves to strengthen alliances directed against China and to forge new ones. For example, the U.S., Japan, Australia and India are striving to develop a common Indo-Pacific front. President Macron is also keen to join this *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* ('Quad'). After many years of existence more on

⁵ Handelsblatt, November 5, 2020

paper, the grouping is now being revived as a key element of a new global political-military block. It is being marketed as a role model for the spirit of multilateralism re-discovered by the U.S. and for safeguarding democracy, international law, security and prosperity "against threats both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond," according to a statement issued in mid-March 2021.⁶

By Beijing, such efforts are perceived as an attempt under U.S. leadership to restrict China's rise and to roll back its influence. Internationalization and militarization are turning what was initially only a contained regional conflict into a live detonator. After all, since the beginning of this January, the combat vessels of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have full authority to fire on foreign ships. There are plenty of reciprocal provocations already. And, as a reminder: The pretext for direct U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War was the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin Incident" in August 1964, in which allegedly Vietnamese boats fired on U.S. ships.

Between cooperation and confrontation

However, for Berlin, expanding its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region is a tightrope walk: The military display is at odds with its eagerness and efforts to further expand cooperation with China as an economic partner. It can further complicate the relationship and lead to incalculable entanglements in conflicts. Conditions in the region are anything but clear, alliances in a state of flux, the players "frememies", on one level friend, on the other foe. Moreover, the ratification of the CAI has not yet been completed and could be put on hold if geopolitical tensions increase. Right now, Beijing is exercising its thumbscrews on Australia when it finds itself politically targeted.

It also puts China's neighbouring countries, such as Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, which are being courted as partners, and the Southeast Asian regional organization ASEAN in between the fighting elephants. They are more inclined to negotiate the South China Sea controversies with the government in Beijing.

For one thing, ASEAN claims for itself the central diplomatic role in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, serving as a forum of dialogue on security issues for the 30 plus governments involved, including both China and the United States. The region has been the site of systemic conflict before during the Cold War till three decades ago, where there was little respect for its intention to remain neutral. In a new Cold War, a "security dialogue" limited to governments of industrialized countries and countries outside of Southeast Asia could undermine this regional multilateralism and weaken ASEAN's position and importance.

Moreover, ASEAN countries themselves have an increased economic stake in being good neighbours with China. For years, the relationship has become increasingly tight. They are among the major beneficiaries of the Belt and Road initiative, the outsourcing of labour-intensive industries, and China's growing appetite for agricultural products and resources such as nickel and bauxite, essen-

⁶ The Diplomat, March 18, 2021

tial to the modernization of China's economy. ASEAN's RCEP has just succeeded in integrating China into a broader economic architecture that also involves close U.S. military allies such as Japan and South Korea - notwithstanding the fact that it is unclear how the benefits will ultimately be distributed given the asymmetry of power.

For Germany and Europe, there is not much to be gained from a demonstrative loyalty to the Indo-Pacific alliance as a political and military junior partner. And the frigate *Bayern*, the European Armada and the divided EU struggling for a common strategy don't seem to really scare Beijing either, if one listens to Xin Hua, deputy director at the Center for European Union Studies in Shanghai. "The EU will not jeopardize its China ties when making moves in the Indo-Pacific region," he said recently.⁷ But in the face of an escalation whose momentum is determined by others, the stakes are high. And Xin Hua's statement also carries a warning. The future course in the Indo-Pacific could become a central issue for the next federal government in Berlin, whatever it looks like.

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)

This is an extended and updated version of the blog post "Militarization: Adventure Trip to the Pacific", posted March 2021, and has been first published in German in "Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik", 5'21 (forthcoming).

⁷ Xin Hua, executive deputy director of the Center for European Union Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, Global Times, March 14, 2021