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Germany in the Indo-Pacific: New Security Actor?

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

Berlin is considering some limited military presence in the Taiwan Strait. This would be a radical shift in Germany's military doctrine and self-perception. For the time being, however, the domestic environment is unlikely to allow for more military deployment.

COMMENTARY

GERMANY AND Japan have much in common. Both were undeniably the main culprits of World War II and both emerged in the aftermath as militarily shy, yet economically strong trading nations. In both cases, the United States' military and economic support facilitated their rehabilitation. Essentially, both were free-riding on American protection.

Both countries subsequently suffer from a significant military antipathy, reflected in both public opinion and their respective constitutions. However, such sentiments are slowly fading with the "1975+ generation". And, more importantly, at a time when the hitherto unquestionable American security guarantee appears less certain. Japan has already embarked on its journey to become a "normal nation", Germany is only slowly catching up.

Opposing "Might is Right"

Lately, it has become apparent that free-riding on the US military may be over and that Germany has much to lose from a "might is right" attitude, not to mention war between the US and China over Taiwan or other Asian hotspots.

As a trading nation, Germany, has an interest in upholding – by force if necessary – the rules-based-order (RBO), depending on free trade and acceptance of international

legal frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Berlin is an ardent advocate of democratic national self-determination and has a definitive interest in opposing illicit trade practices as much as illegal military action. While the European Union has slowly toughened its language and action vis-à-vis unfair Chinese trade practices, it has remained woefully lethargic when Russia annexed Crimea.

Talk is rife in Berlin that senior defence officials have been debating German Marine deployments in far-flung theatres, such as the Taiwan Strait, following examples set by the US, and more importantly for Germany, France. While this would constitute a laudable step towards Germany living up to its international responsibilities, the time is unfortunately not quite ripe.

There are at least two prevalent gaps between the necessary and the possible, which Berlin must overcome in the medium-term: the public sentiment gap and the capacity gap.

German Anti-Militarism

Germany's expansionist role in WWII has left a lasting imprint on its society. Arguably no other nation is as open, critical and brutally honest about its own dark past. History and social science lessons in schools are essentially remnants of the "four D" principles of occupied Germany: Denazification, Demilitarisation, Democratisation, and Decentralisation.

Public identification with the military is very low, military symbolism unpopular, and being labelled a patriot can even be offensive. Particularly, the Green and the Left parties sport anti-militarism at the very heart of their political identity.

And, ironically, the so-called "anti-Americanism", commonly expressed scepticism towards American military interventions worldwide. These military sceptic parties poll a combined current high of 35% with the Greens polling particularly well.

Furthermore, military campaigns must be explicitly supported by parliament, and the AFD (10-13%) is equally unlikely to support increased spending or deployments for anything other than direct homeland defence. Among the public, especially urban youths and the older generation support such military scepticism. The latter in particular have been politicised by successive waves of liberal, anti-war movements.

Bundeswehr Not Fit for Purpose

The trench-deep gap between public opinion and more forward-thinking stakeholders (especially within the CDU, FDP and the wider foreign policy elite) frustrates efforts to incrementally increase military spending and capacity building.

Consequently, Germany spends significantly less than other NATO members on defence; and Washington appropriately accuses Germany of free-riding. Berlin coughs up a mere 1.2% of GDP for defence, compared to France's 2.3% and US'

3.4%. German justifications, such as including development aid, are unconvincing and at best window-dressing.

Serious underfinancing, poor political management of the armed forces and low public support for the military has left the *Bundeswehr* (the German armed forces) with a serious capability gap. More often than not, less than half of German fighter aircraft and support helicopters, tanks, and submarines are operationally ready. This is ironic, considering that Germany is the fourth-largest exporter of such military hardware worldwide.

Should the Germans indeed eventually sail a warship through the Taiwan Strait, it would constitute a remarkable step towards becoming a more internationally responsible nation. Particularly vis-à-vis China, with which Germany enjoys substantial trade relations and Berlin has traditionally been cautious about, lest business relations are negatively affected.

Military deployments are no panacea, of course, but Berlin could signal to its allies that Germany is overcoming its free-riding mentality, becoming a reliable partner in, inter alia, RBO defence; a signal to Washington, but also to Paris, which likes to present itself as the only European nation with meaningful capabilities.

European Cooperation to Bridge Gaps

Unfortunately however, this is unlikely for the time being; too large are the two gaps. German elites must explain the necessity of international deployments to both the public and MPs, and quickly work towards meeting the 2% NATO spending goal, and more.

Now, it would be unfair to dismiss the *Bundeswehr's* progress that has seen a steady increase of readiness levels. But progress is too slow and incremental and for now, Europe may be the only answer. It is unlikely that France – or the United Kingdom – have the means to meaningfully deploy their military capacity in the Indo-Pacific for a sustained period of time.

NATO is not mandated under such circumstances and, hence, mini-lateral European cooperation can best bridge capacity gaps, contribute meaningfully to upholding the RBO in the Indo-Pacific, and advance the EU's role as a security actor. Especially among the larger EU-5, coordinated mini-lateral deployment is desirable.

Initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund are steps in the right direction. But more significantly, Germany must step up to the plate nationally in terms of spending, capacity building and deployment. For the time being, however, history prevents Germany from becoming a meaningful military actor.

Dr. Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg