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Germany and Indo-Pacific: Berlin's ASEAN-Style Regionalism?

By Alan Chong & Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

Germany has published its own Indo-Pacific policy guidelines, signalling its commitment to multilateralism and the rules-based regime for peaceful coexistence. The clever language of the guidelines seems to echo ASEAN's cautious diplomacy.

COMMENTARY

EVER SINCE the German government's adoption of its 'Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific' in September 2020, its defence minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, has been engaged in active diplomacy. She spoke first in a virtual bilateral forum with Australia's foreign minister in Canberra in early November, and then in another on 13 November with Singapore's defence minister.

On paper, Germany comes across as an unlikely party to the debates over whether Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific regionalism should take precedence in military confidence-building, defence diplomacy, free trade expansion, or diplomatic-community canvassing. Germany is regarded by most Indo-Pacific states as an economic heavyweight, but not as a geopolitical actor, and certainly not on the order of Australia, China, Japan or the United States. Militarily, it lags behind the British and French naval presence — in Asia and in general with limited naval capabilities.

Berlin's Two Flags

But Berlin flies two flags, the national and the multilateral. As the largest member state and historically the most central state for European stability, Germany rightly sees itself as the champion and leader of European integration. In German strategic perspectives, unilateralism in international relations is no longer an option.

For better or worse, Germany regards the entirety of its foreign and security policy as being anchored in NATO and the European Union. As a result, not only is Germany's Indo-Pacific entry a precursor for a greater EU and NATO role in the Indo-Pacific.

It also fiercely advocates the strengthening of indigenous multilateral mechanisms. While Germany may appear patronising to some extent in certain ASEAN quarters, Berlin's strong support of the existing regional architecture is likely to be positively received in Southeast Asia.

The nuancing of Germany's entry into the Indo-Pacific is music to ASEAN's diplomatic ears. It is perhaps no coincidence that Berlin's 'guidelines' describe something akin to an 'ASEAN Peace' dominating the Indo-Pacific, characterised mostly by domestic stability and almost non-existent interstate 'hot wars'.

ASEAN-Style Diplomacy: Naming No Enemies

At the same time, Berlin acknowledges, rather than warns, that significant shifts in the balance of power have occurred – without naming the powers engineering these shifts.

Better still, Berlin has mastered the art of purveying a general scenario that could slide into miscalculation. The beautifully crafted words read: "Past conflicts continue to have an impact on stability to this day. The region is a fairly blank spot in institutional and normative terms and is characterised by rapidly increasing arms dynamics."

This language covers a whole gamut of low intensity conflicts ranging from border skirmishes in the Himalayas to naval passages in the contested Spratly islands. This is surely taking a page from ASEAN's time-honoured circuitously phrased and highly diplomatic communiques.

Needless to say, this technique allows the target of veiled criticism to save face while taking indirect cognisance of their peers' displeasure at recent militant actions. Likewise, such succinct diplomacy is necessary if Germany is ever to successfully achieve the paper's second objective: a common EU Strategy.

Such a strategy requires consensus among EU's 27 member states, some of whom act cautiously vis-à-vis China, fearing economic repercussions as witnessed in Australia. If the German guidelines are to become a blueprint for an eventual EU consensus, it must be a diplomatic document and devoid of any confrontational language that characterises, for example, the US Indo-Pacific paper.

Incremental Confidence-Building

Even better, Germany's guidelines call for omnidirectional confidence-building as an inclusive strategy for subtly joining the efforts of the QUAD countries – an informal strategic forum comprising Australia, India, Japan and the US – to ASEAN's emphatic non-alignment and subtle leanings.

The operative text in Berlin's document reads: "More and more governments, organisations and institutions worldwide are making the Indo-Pacific region their

conceptual frame of reference and thus the basis of their policies, for example Japan, the US, India, Australia, France and ASEAN. All Indo-Pacific concepts allude to the rules-based international order.”

Moreover, it warns that ‘certain quarters’ are experiencing discomfort with China’s status as both a regional power and emerging world power with respect to the rules-based order. With these concerns and pledges towards a normative multilateralism expressed, Kramp-Karrenbauer openly declared that Germany supported all parties’ efforts to tamp down militarization and practise multilateralist behaviour in the Indo-Pacific.

In this way, Berlin is putting some distance between Washington’s stronger anti-China line and the milder signals of concern emanating from ASEAN. This will facilitate the widening of diplomatic space for something akin to an Indo-Pacific community. Hopefully, this will also pre-emptively dissuade would-be disturbers of the peace from acting unilaterally to push their territorial claims.

Going Beyond the Trump Administration

In a not-so-subtle jab at the policies of Donald Trump, Germany’s guidelines also stress the importance of sustainable and reliable strategic partnership and dialogues as the way forward to undergirding peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. The guidelines declare that the future of the Indo-Pacific is neither unipolar nor bipolar.

It declares that “hegemony, and also the consolidation of bipolar structures, would endanger an approach comprising deepened and diversified partnerships in the region. No country should [...] be forced to choose between two sides or fall into a state of unilateral dependency. Freedom of choice [...] is vitally important for countries in the Indo-Pacific region”.

Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer echoed the same soothing inclusive tones throughout her diplomatic waltz through a number of virtual Indo-Pacific forums; she noted that Germany was interested in supporting all local initiatives that fostered stability and non-confrontational interstate behaviour.

If one compares this with ASEAN’s foundational discourse of national resilience leading, as a result, to regional resilience for peace, then Germany’s foray into Indo-Pacific discourse is to be more than welcome.

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