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German Warship in Asia: Berlin's Indo-Pacific Strategy?

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

While the deployment of a German frigate to the Indo-Pacific region is only a signal, the question is to whom and for what exactly? Still, this marks a sea-change in Germany's traditional foreign policy.

COMMENTARY

SOMETIME AROUND Christmas this year, the German frigate *Bayern* will reach Singapore. By then, it will have been deployed for over four months, taking part in naval operations and exercises, crew training, and it will have visited several ports across the Indo-Pacific.

This will be the first time in nearly two decades that a German warship traverses East and South Asian seas. Mostly for historic reasons, the German navy is comparatively small, meaning that the *Bayern* is among the largest surface combatants Berlin can deploy. With this, Berlin has — finally — discovered both the need and value of naval assets for strategic communication and defence diplomacy, with both an internal and an external audience in mind.

Reluctant Strategic Actor

Traditionally, post-war Germany has not exactly been enthusiastic about security. Atypical for a country of its size and strategic location, its governments eschew strategic thinking and planning, and they leave pro-active provisions of security to others even in its immediate neighbourhood. Berlin often contributes only marginally and never unilaterally.

“Never alone again” is one of the great lessons of Germany’s 20th century experience. This sentiment is deeply rooted in both the public and political elite.

It was, therefore, quite an unusual sight for Germans to see the defence minister personally bidding farewell to the *Bayern* and its sailors when the ship left Wilhelmshaven naval base on a de facto unilateral voyage to a far-flung region. “Gunboat diplomacy” suspicions made their rounds again among parts of the German public.

The first addressee of this deployment is, therefore, a largely anti-militaristic German public. The deployment of the *Bayern* communicates to its people that the military, especially the *Marine* (Navy) can be a legitimate instrument of foreign policy – common practice in many countries but highly controversial in post-war Germany.

The decision by the government seeks to gradually habituate the public to the strategic and diplomatic use of military assets beyond calls for support by Germany’s allies. But the actual voyage of the *Bayern*, on the other hand, is everything but unilateral.

Participation in multilateral exercises and UN operations symbolise a Germany that pulls its weight in action, not only rhetoric, and the public will recognise that such deployments are in support of partnerships and multilateralism, not German gunboat diplomacy.

Alliance Loyalty

The current government is deeply committed to the transatlantic alliance. And, as is well-known, Washington has for many years called for greater German contribution to European and global security.

Germany’s 2020 [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) is partly in response to this call and marks [a sea change in traditional German foreign policy](#). Berlin recognises Washington’s strategic re-prioritisation and accepts the Indo-Pacific as America’s new main theatre. Berlin also admits, albeit indirectly, that the times of turbocharged export-led economic growth while leaving the provision of security good to the United States are over.

The *Bayern* now communicates to Washington – and Germany’s partners in NATO and the region – that Berlin’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific and the principles laid out in its Indo-Pacific strategy – to open sea lanes and the primacy of international law, etc. – are more than lofty words.

Politically unable to raise defence spending significantly, this deployment is partly meant to demonstrate that Germany is increasingly willing to pull its weight in global security.

Make No Enemies

As a highly export-dependent economy, Germany does have an evident interest in regional stability in Asia and open sea lanes in general. But for much the same reason, it also has a strong interest in maintaining workable relations with Beijing, the third addressee of the *Bayern*’s message.

In terms of overall trade volume, China is Germany's largest trade partner, largest import, and second-largest export market. For the critically important manufacturing industry, China is the most vital market. That the German economy is cruising through the COVID-19 crisis comparatively well is largely a function of a thriving Chinese market.

Had the *Bayern's* deployment been left solely to the defence ministry, its route might have been more controversial, sending a more robust message to Beijing. But the government seeks to communicate that it has no part in Washington's, the Quad's, or even British intentions to challenge any of China's territorial core interests militarily.

Unlike the Indo-Pacific visions of some of China's neighbours and the US, the German strategy does not single out Beijing as the main problem. Instead, it sees a future regional security order that is inclusive of China. Consistent with this message, the *Bayern* has requested a friendly port visit to Shanghai.

Likewise, the *Bayern* will neither unilaterally undertake nor partake in any freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOP), and it will take a detour so as to not traverse the Taiwan Strait.

This is part fig leaf, part legal requirement. Berlin wanted to avoid the legislative process of approval any potentially robust military operation has to undergo according to German constitutional law. Hence, the *Bayern* is decidedly not a military but a training mission. But it is also certainly meant to be a strategic signal to Beijing, and a [well-received one](#).

Symbols Matter

Germany is not over-night becoming a robust militarily actor in the Indo-Pacific, and the *Bayern's* deployment remains intentionally ambiguous. But it matters, nonetheless. Berlin has for various reasons identified the region as being of strategic interests. It now needs to show face, backing-up rhetoric with both hard assets and multilateral and defence diplomacy.

This author spends much effort trying to convince regional stakeholders that Germany can contribute to its partners' strategic interests, which are, ultimately, also Germany's interests. Alas, thus far, there has been little concrete evidence to show for. This is only a start, and the momentum must be further utilised. But symbols matter.

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