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A German Warship in Asia: Debunking Myths and Misconceptions

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The Brandenburg-class frigate, FGS Bayern. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

SYNOPSIS

The first German naval deployment to the Indo-Pacific region in decades came in the form of one single frigate. This unilateral and ostensibly inadequate deployment invited plenty of criticism; much of it is based on the fundamental misunderstanding of Germany's intentions, priorities, and its strategic identity.

COMMENTARY

As the German frigate *Bayern* leaves Asia for its journey's final leg, it is still too early to evaluate the mission's overall accomplishments. Against the backdrop of much criticism from external observers, it is timely to reflect on some common misunderstandings and false expectations.

The central concern among the many critics of Germany's most recent military deployment are the general parameters the German government has defined. Much of the criticism is understandable, including criticising the *Bayern's* non-controversial route, such as not passing through the Taiwan Strait, its limited participation in naval exercises especially in the South China Sea, the mission's intensity, the request for a port of call in China, and eschewing the opportunity to embed the German frigate within a larger European mission. All of this, however, reveals a misunderstanding of Germany's objectives.

Sailing Solo

One particularly salient criticism is the apparent contradiction between Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines and the *Bayern's* deployment. Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines have an explicit objective, indeed its *raison d'être*, is to work with partners to enhance regional multilateralism. This was reinforced numerous times by German officials in Berlin and abroad.

Yet, the *Bayern's* mission is at face value a unilateral effort. Neither did the *Marine* harness the opportunity to sail jointly with the British or the French — like the Dutch frigate HNLMS *Evertsen* recently did — nor did they seek more robust engagement with allies and partners at sea; PASSEX, limited exercises in international water and port calls aside.

Nonetheless, from a German perspective, all major objectives of this deployment are best served with a comparatively low-key and autonomous visit.

First, balancing Germany's strong economic presence in the Indo-Pacific with a military component is meant to demonstrate (predominantly to Washington) that Germany understands it must end its mercantile ignorance towards its allies' strategic needs. Berlin seeks to show that the region matters beyond its economic value. This message needs a degree of visibility that a single frigate in a much larger multinational coalition does not provide. Besides, the risk of potentially controversial — even confrontational — routes, are difficult to control in a multinational mission. After a two-decade absence from these waters, the German Navy also thought it an opportune moment to train sailing in unknown waters.

Second, Berlin wants to sound out local partners about its own preferences; to have honest bilateral conversations free from strategic pressures and tensions among third parties. The intention was not to demonstrate military capacity but instead to showcase a genuine German interest in Indo-Pacific countries' preferences beyond American or Chinese pressure.

The German Navy did consider dispatching a more formidable warship but, for various reasons, settled on the *Bayern*, a *Brandenburg*-class frigate; fully functional but smaller and much older than, for example, the *Baden-Württemberg*-class. This distinguishes the German deployment from, for instance, the Royal Navy who recently dispatched their most prestigious aircraft carrier.

Arguably, the gained insights about very diverse regional preferences, proved the benefit of this low-key, less confrontational approach. Not everyone in the region likes to see ever-more robust military presence by an ever-greater number of external parties.

Security Priorities

Critics also allege that German efforts to avoid irking Beijing, such as stating that this deployment was not directed against anyone, or the request for a port of call in Shanghai, would undermine the entire undertaking in the first place. However, such criticism would be justified *only* if the *Bayern* was a ship of the US Navy.

First, as much as this may alienate Washington and other allies, Berlin does not seek to take part in great power conflict and this applies to Russia as well as China. Some critics go as far as arguing it would have made strategic sense to maintain the possibility of sailing so-called American Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), i.e., traversing within 12 nautical miles of disputed territory claimed by China.

While Berlin is of course concerned about and strongly opposed to Beijing's authoritarianism at home and assertiveness abroad, China is, at most, number three or four on Germany's security priority list; China is less security-relevant than Russia, the EU neighbourhood, and even the Sahel region and North Africa. It is irrational and indeed unnecessary at this stage to seek out confrontation with Beijing, burn bridges built by Angela Merkel, and destroy the potential of inclusive engagement, as preferred by Germany's ASEAN partners, for example.

Second, what virtually all critics of the *Bayern*'s ostensibly "soft" approach either do not know or willingly ignore is that this naval deployment is explicitly a training and presence exercise, not a military mission. In Germany's constitution, this makes a great difference.

As a right and logical consequence of German history, the *Bundeswehr* are parliamentary, not executive armed forces. Much simplified, military deployments which might see confrontation with a third party must seek prior parliamentary approval.

The Indo-Pacific deployment was driven mostly by then-defence minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, now retired from politics. Had it been up to the defence ministry back then, the *Bayern* might well have passed through the Taiwan Strait and more. But the German government as a whole, the Angela Merkel Chancellery and the Social Democrat (SPD)-led foreign ministry in particular, did not wish to add to the confrontational atmosphere. They did not even seriously consider pursuing the complex and very uncertain process of gaining parliamentary approval; and even if they did consider, they were very unlikely to get it. Neither the SPD nor the Greens —

not to mention the far-left and far-right — would agree to traverse disputed waters, the Taiwan Strait especially, nor to joint exercises with allies in disputed waters.

Since the September 2021 elections returned a very different German government and parliament, such approval has become even less likely for the foreseeable future. The two strongest governing parties, the SPD and the Greens, are traditionally hesitant when it comes to both defence spending and military deployments. Now, the SPD has taken over both the Chancellery and defence, and the Greens the foreign ministry.

In short, a robust deployment was never considered because it was never a realistic option and it also wouldn't match Germany's objectives.

German Value-added

Germany's past does not absolve it of contributions, including military, to international security. In fact, it bestows on Berlin a responsibility to defend the so-called rules-based order; more concrete, to support international relations based on international law and to promote a basic consensus on both basic rights of the individual and basic responsibilities of the state.

At the same time, it is not Germany's intention, and indeed not in its interest, to contribute to further polarisation of international relations. Resulting from its unique historical experience, its geographic location, and the size of its economy, Germany's role should be one of bridge builder.

In the Indo-Pacific, Germany does not see its role as adding weight to a "pro-US coalition", at least not at this stage. Instead, Germany can and should be a voice of reason, a partner to peace-loving regional states that do not seek military confrontation but instead seeks multilateralism and dialogue. As important as a military balance of power in Asia is, Germany's most valuable contributions are in diplomacy, dialogue, and partnership. As Henry Kissinger — certainly not a naïve liberalist — once pointed out, a purely military interpretation of balance, without an active mediatory partnership approach, will eventually shade into conflict.

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