

Chapter 4

GERMANY AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: SHAPING THE MARITIME ENVIRONMENT THROUGH LIMITED MEANS

Maximilian Reinold

Given China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and its closer military cooperation with Russia, Germany has become more aware of how developments in the Indo-Pacific affect security in the Euro-Atlantic. Because of its deep interconnections in global trade, Berlin is concerned about potential escalations in the South China Sea that could disrupt freedom of navigation along critical sea routes and threaten key trading and strategic partners. China's rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling,¹ its construction of artificial islands, and its use of grey-zone tactics,² coupled with its support for Russia's war against Ukraine, have further eroded Berlin's confidence in Beijing's willingness to act responsibly in South China Sea issues.³ These trends have prompted Germany to increase its political, diplomatic, and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific region with littoral states and middle-power countries. In addition, Berlin's recent more overt criticism of China in documents and statements indicates that Germany expects tensions to rise further in the years to come.

This chapter examines how Germany assesses the risk of escalation in the South China Sea over the next years, what measures it is taking to prevent such escalation, and how Berlin works with regional and extra-regional middle-power countries to strengthen stability and reduce the likelihood of conflict. It argues that Germany is pursuing a limited but integrated approach to the South China Sea. This includes increasing regional deployments that signal Germany's global commitment to open sealanes, joint military exercises, forging partnerships with regional, as well as a shift in Germany's already strong (naval) arms transfers as an indirect foreign policy tool that sustains German interests in the region. Through these efforts, Berlin aims to strengthen regional states' capabilities to act in Germany's interest in the South China Sea and to enhance the

¹ In 2016, the court ruled in the case, initiated by the Philippines, that China's "nine-dash line" and its "historic rights" claims over the sea have no legal basis under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Permanent Court of Arbitration, "The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)," Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016, <https://pca-cpa.org/cn/cases/7/>.

² This includes a range of activities, such as ship ramming, using laser pointers, water cannoning, amongst others. Bonny Lin et al., "A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics," RAND Report, March 30, 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA594-1.html.

³ "German Foreign Minister Criticises Beijing's Support for Russia Ahead of China Visit," *The Straits Times*, December 2, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/german-foreign-minister-criticises-beijings-support-for-russia-ahead-of-china-visit>.

normative and legal pillars that underpin the regional maritime order, based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The analysis unfolds in three parts. The first examines key policy documents, official statements, and interviews, to show how Germany has become increasingly outspoken about tensions in the South China Sea. Secondly, the analysis outlines the foreign policy instruments that Germany now uses more deliberately in response to growing Chinese assertiveness. Thirdly, the analysis examines Germany's security cooperation with middle and smaller regional powers. Finally, the paper assesses how Germany's fundamental security policy shift following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has mixed effects on Berlin's ability to engage in, for, and with the South China Sea. This includes an overview of policy tools beyond naval deployments, such as strategic capacity building and the forging of defence partnerships and a discussion of potential strategic pathways in light of trade-offs between European- and global commitments. The chapter recommends fostering naval deployments under the European Union (EU) flag, reconsidering the role of arms transfer and capacity building efforts, and similarly leveraging the strategic value of technological cooperation between Germany and regional middle-power countries.

Germany's shifting discourse on the South China Sea

Over the last two decades, Germany's analysis has shifted to increasingly regard China's rise as an economic and military power as an indirect security threat.⁴ Germany's recent strategic documents, such as the *China Strategy* (2023), the *Indo-Pacific Guidelines* (2020), and its progress report (2021-2024), as well as its *National Security Strategy* (2023), *Naval Strategy* (2025), and Coalition agreements underscore growing concerns about China, describing China as a "a partner, competitor and systemic rival".⁵ Germany does not have a distinct South China Sea strategy as this is incorporated within its broader Indo-Pacific approach.

As a *Handelsnation* (trading nation) critically dependent on free and open sea routes the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs published the *Leitlinien* "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Germany – Europe – Asia Shaping the 21st Century Together" (IPG) in September 2020. With it, Germany joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, France, India, Japan, and the United States in publicly outlining an Indo-Pacific strategy document. The guidelines, also formulated the goal of setting the basis for an EU strategy, which indeed followed in 2021.

Germany outlines eight primary interests in its guidelines, with three especially relevant for the South China Sea dispute: maintaining open sea lanes, preventing hegemonic

⁴ Hugo Meijer, *Awakening to China's Rise: European Foreign and Security Policies toward the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 87-92.

⁵ Federal Government of Germany, *Robust, Resilient, Sustainable: Integrated Security for Germany – National Security Strategy* (Berlin, 2023), 23, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>.

dominance, and supporting a rules-based maritime order. In particular, the IPG promises to increase German security cooperation in the region, which “may include attending security policy forums, taking part in exercises in the region, elaborating joint evacuation plans, seconding liaison officers and various forms of maritime presence”.⁶ However, it still does not openly address China as the main aggressor or security threat in the region – neither in the South China Sea nor in the Strait of Taiwan and the East China Sea.

This language on China has nevertheless incrementally changed throughout the last five years. Every year since the release of the IPG, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has released a progress report. Unlike the initial guidelines, the recent reports explicitly observe that “tensions have risen further in the South China Sea in light of China’s expansive maritime claims, thus heightening the risk of, also unintended, escalation”.⁷ Further, government officials have been more outspoken in attributing the rising tensions to China’s behaviour. Defence Minister Boris Pistorius remarked that “Chinese ambitions and capabilities have been growing. This is posing a threat to the existing order in the region”.⁸ Former Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called China’s maritime harassments in Philippine waters “risky manoeuvres [that] violate the rights and economic development opportunities of your country and other neighbouring countries” that “call into question the freedom of the sea routes guaranteed under international law in an area through which a third of global maritime trade flows”.⁹ Moreover, current Foreign Minister Johann Wadehul said that “China’s growing military assertiveness in the South China Sea not only threatens Asia’s security, but also undermines the international rules-based order as a whole”.¹⁰

Besides China’s growing assertiveness, a fundamental factor in Germany’s reconsideration of the South China Sea was China’s deepening military cooperation with Russia. The Progress Report 2024 states that this “sharp increase in supplies of dual-use

⁶ Federal Government of Germany, *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Germany—Europe—Asia, Shaping the Twenty-First Century Together* (Federal Government of Germany, 2020), 18. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

⁷ Federal Government of Germany, *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government’s Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the Year 2024* (Federal Government of Germany, 2024), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2677526/9fbc35a4f327e4cf6648fad20e3b56d/240925-llip-en-fortschrittsbericht-data.pdf>.

⁸ Boris Pistorius, “Partner für den Frieden: Pistorius am Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies,” Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, July 31, 2024, <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/pistorius-asia-pacific-center-for-security-studies-5828586>.

⁹ “German Foreign Minister, in Philippines, Raps China’s ‘Risky Manoeuvres’ in South China Sea,” Reuters, January 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-foreign-minister-philippines-raps-chinas-risky-manoeuvres-south-china-sea-2024-01-11/>.

¹⁰ Johann Wadehul, “Speech by Foreign Minister Johann Wadehul at the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia in Jakarta,” Federal Foreign Office, August 20, 2025, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/2730776-2730776>.

goods – civil and military from China for Russia’s defence industry is putting security in Europe at risk with their use in Ukraine”.¹¹

Taken together, these documents and statements indicate that Berlin increasingly sees the South China Sea as a key theatre where Chinese behaviour undermines both the rules-based maritime order and German economic and security interests. They further reveal an implicit risk assessment: Berlin expects continued Chinese coercion below the threshold of open conflict, combined with a growing danger of unintended escalation.

Germany’s expanding South China Sea engagement

Germany has increased its engagement in the Indo-Pacific through military deployments, joint exercises, strategic partnerships, and arms transfers, intending to prevent further escalation. However, given its strategic and operational focus on its immediate neighbourhood, these foreign policy tools in the Indo-Pacific remain limited and primarily aim to indirectly shape the maritime environment rather than the immediate material balance of power in the South China Sea. These measures are not intended to serve as a direct deterrent but to contribute to regional state capacity-building, signalling, and symbolic promotion of maritime norms.

Naval deployments and exercises

Germany committed to sending naval ships on a biannual basis into the region. For instance, in August 2021, the German frigate *Bayern* began a seven-month voyage – the first German naval deployment to the Indo-Pacific region in over twenty years. On its mission, it made port calls in (amongst others) Karachi, Perth, Guam, Tokyo, Busan, Singapore, Ho Chi Minh City, Colombo, and Mumbai. On its tour, the German Navy participated in several bi- and multilateral exercises. These included a live-firing exercise with the Singaporean Navy, passing exercises (PASSEX) with the United States and Pakistan, Viet Nam, and Sri Lanka, as well as in the *Annual Exercise 2021 (ANNUALEX 21)* with the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), and the United States Navy (USN).¹² Additionally, the frigate joined countries such as the UK, the United States, and Japan in conducting surveillance operations on North Korea and enforcing the UN embargo. Berlin was, however, careful about its message. As the frigate moved across the South China Sea, the *Bayern* took care to avoid actions that might provoke China. It remained on international shipping lanes, avoided military exercises or Freedom of Navigation

¹¹ Federal Government of Germany, *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government’s Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the Year 2024*.

¹² Dzirhan Mahadzir, “German Navy Chief: Frigate Deployment to Indo-Pacific First of Biennial Deployments to Region,” *USNI News*, December 21, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/12/21/germany-navy-chief-frigate-deployment-to-indo-pacific-first-of-biannual-deployments-to-region>.

Operations in contested areas, and did not pass through the Strait of Taiwan.¹³ To send a benign signal to China, it attempted a port visit to Shanghai, but Beijing denied the request.¹⁴

The following Indo-Pacific deployment in 2024 was significantly expanded, and the Ministry of Defence declared it to be “the most complex operation the German Navy has ever undertaken”¹⁵ and “the German Navy’s most important defence diplomacy and enhanced security cooperation project this year”.¹⁶ According to the Ministry of Defence, it had three core missions: deepen cooperation with regional partners, contribute to securing sea lanes and trade routes through maritime presence, and demonstrate that Germany remains a reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific despite the war on European soil.¹⁷ This time, two naval ships, the *Baden-Württemberg* (F125-class frigate) and the *Frankfurt am Main* (a *Berlin*-class replenishment ship), crossed the Atlantic, through the Panama Canal, the Pacific, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Importantly, Germany crossed the Strait of Taiwan, which was met with vehement protest by Chinese officials.¹⁸

Port calls included, amongst others, New York, Hawaii (for the *Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) 2024* exercise) Tokyo, and Incheon, Manila, Singapore, Port Klang, Jakarta, Indonesia and Goa. The ships participated in a range of naval exercises, most importantly the aforementioned *RIMPAC 24* exercise, the United States-Japan-led exercise *NOBLE RAVEN*, and joint exercises with Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines.¹⁹ In addition to these naval exercises, the German Air Force participated in several exercises during its Air Force deployments, *Rapid Pacific 22*, and *Pacific Skies 24*, and the land and naval forces in the Australian-led exercise *Talisman Sabre 23* and 25.²⁰

¹³ Christina Keßler, “Germany’s Defense Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Is a Balancing Act,” *The Diplomat*, June 15, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/germanys-defense-engagement-in-the-indo-pacific-is-a-balancing-act/>.

¹⁴ Deutsche Welle (DW), “China Denies Port Visit by German Warship,” *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, September 15, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/china-denies-port-visit-by-german-warship/a-59190643>.

¹⁵ “Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 (IPD24) – Port Call in Singapore,” German Embassy Singapore, September 12, 2024, <https://singapur.diplo.de/sg-en/2675430-2675430>.

¹⁶ “Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024,” German Navy / Bundeswehr, 2024, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/indo-pacific-deployment-2024>.

¹⁷ “Engagement im Indo-Pazifik: Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 Abgeschlossen [Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 Completed],” Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, December 11, 2024, <https://www.bmvg.de/de/themen/dossiers/engagement-im-indopazifik>.

¹⁸ Alex Luck, “German Navy Ships Transit Taiwan Strait, Draw Chinese Criticism,” *Naval News*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/09/german-navy-transits-taiwan-strait/>.

¹⁹ Alex Luck, “German Navy Wraps Indopacific Deployment – A Naval News Assessment,” *Naval News*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/12/german-navy-wraps-indopacific-deployment-a-naval-news-assessment/>; “Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 (IPD24) – Port Call in Singapore.”; Maria T. Reyes, “Germany’s Naval Deployment Deepens Ties in Southeast Asia,” Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, November 20, 2024, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/11/germanys-naval-deployment-deepens-ties-in-southeast-asia/>.

²⁰ “This Is Rapid Pacific 2022,” Luftwaffe / Bundeswehr, August 27, 2022. <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/luftwaffe/aktuelles/this-is-rapid-pacific-2022->

Compared with the 2021 Indo-Pacific Deployment, the 2024 deployment can be interpreted as a clear shift towards greater risk acceptance to send a stronger signal to Beijing, underscoring commitments to a rules-based order and peace and security in the region. Nonetheless, the overall scale remains small relative to Germany's core commitments in Europe and also compared to the deployments in the region of Germany's European neighbours, France and the UK, and its regional partners Australia and Japan. For example, France can sustain more regular deployments due to its status as a 'resident power', operating military commands in Réunion and Mayotte, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia, as well as maintaining forces in the United Arab Emirates and Djibouti.²¹ Consequently, Germany's deployments in recent years pale in comparison to France's Aircraft Carrier Strike Group Mission *Clemenceau 25* and its regular bilateral and multinational exercises, such as *Varuna* and *La Pérouse*.²² Similarly, the UK frequently deploys significant assets to the region, such as during the Carrier Strike Group deployment in 2025, during which the Royal Navy participated in high-end warfare exercises for five months with, among others, the United States, Japan, and Australia.²³

Forging partnerships to avert further escalation

These deployments and joint exercises are part of Germany's efforts to forge and deepen strategic partnerships that have become an important foreign policy instrument in recent years.²⁴ Given Germany's limited capacity for sustained presence in the South China Sea, Berlin is increasingly investing in partnerships, recognising that its impact is likely to be greater through cooperation with other middle-power countries. Accordingly, it seeks to coordinate its Indo-Pacific engagement with Japan, Australia, India, South Korea, ASEAN states, and through the European Union. These initiatives contribute to both the material balance of power, as well as to upholding the normative and legal pillars of the maritime order in light of China's contestation of maritime norms. As the following statement from the *Progress Report 2024* attests, a key component of Indo-Pacific policy

²⁴ 5484614; "Pacific Skies 24 – One Deployment, Five Exercises," German Air Force / Bundeswehr, 2024. <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/german-air-force/pacific-skies-24->.

²¹ Antoine Bondaz, "Fact Sheet No.4: Military Presence and Defence Diplomacy — Defending Sovereignty and Promoting Stability in the Indo-Pacific Region," Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, December 18, 2023, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/fiches-indo-pacifique/n4-military-presence-defence-diplomacy>.

²² Léonie Allard, "Deciphering French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific," War on the Rocks, March 13, 2025. <https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/deciphering-french-strategy-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

²³ Euan Graham, "An Indo-Pacific Role for Britain's Aircraft Carriers: High-Value Escort," The Strategist, August 13, 2025, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/an-indo-pacific-role-for-britains-aircraft-carriers-high-value-escort/>. See also, UK Ministry of Defence and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, "UK Carrier Strike Group Returns to the Mediterranean," HM Government, November 5, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-returns-to-the-mediterranean>.

²⁴ Tim Hildebrandt and Julian Klose, "The New Dynamism in Germany's Relations With South Korea," The Diplomat, January 5, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/the-new-dynamism-in-germanys-relations-with-south-korea/>.

is deepening defence partnerships with and among South China Sea states and regional middle-power countries, especially Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea:

In order to support partners in the Indo-Pacific with overcoming traditional security challenges, the Federal Government is promoting an open, rules-based regional security architecture and is committed to enhancing capabilities of and enabling partners especially in the field of maritime security.²⁵

Although most of these partnerships represent general forms of defence cooperation, they typically place a strong emphasis on the maritime domain. This reflects Berlin's core interests in upholding freedom-of-navigation norms and peace, particularly in the South China Sea. Consequently, Berlin prefers regional partners whose legal and normative emphasis on UNCLOS aligns closely with its own approach to the South China Sea.

This applies in particular to Germany's partnerships with key middle-power countries that are not directly involved in the territorial dispute but serve as connectors within the regional maritime security network.

Japan is especially perceived as Germany's 'premium partner' in the region.²⁶ As both countries stress their common value basis – most significantly regarding maritime norms – Germany and Japan have deepened their security cooperation in recent years. A confidentiality agreement was reached in 2021, enabling their intelligence agencies closer information sharing.²⁷ Furthermore, Berlin institutionalised the 2+2 format (with Australia), seconded officers to Yokosuka for UN North Korea sanctions monitoring, and the German Navy conducted exercises with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces on various occasions. The "Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement" (ACSA) entered into force in July 2024, potentially further enabling German naval deployments by reducing logistical constraints for German presence in the wider region in the coming years.²⁸

²⁵ Federal Government of Germany, *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the Year 2024*.

²⁶ Takahashi Kosuke, "Amb. Petra Sigmund on Germany–Japan Security Cooperation," The Diplomat, October 20, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/amb-petra-sigmund-on-germany-japan-security-cooperation/>.

²⁷ "Sign of Mutual Trust: Japan and Germany Sign Agreement on the Security of Information," Federal Foreign Office, March 22, 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/japan-node/japan-agreement-security-information-2449392>.

²⁸ "Entry into Force of the Agreement Between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services Between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, July 12, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00427.html. See also, Gabriel Dominguez, "'No Time to Lose': Germany Aims to Boost Defense-Industrial Ties With Japan," *The Japan Times*, July 1, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/07/01/japan/politics/germany-japan-ambassador-defense-spending/>.

Similarly, Berlin upgraded its relationship with Australia to an Enhanced Strategic Partnership (2021) and has held several high-level meetings that stress common interests in freedom of navigation. Further, a memorandum of understanding on defence science and technology was signed with Australia in November 2023 to expand further research cooperation.²⁹ German forces regularly participate in multinational exercises under Australian leadership. The German Air Force flew in *Pitch Black* (2022 and 2024) and *Kakadu* (2022)³⁰ and participated in *Talismen Sabre* (2023 and 2025).³¹

Beyond Japan and Australia, Berlin elevated operational ties with India, as an emerging maritime power that seeks to expand its engagement in the South China Sea.. For a long time, Berlin was reluctant to deepen defence ties with New Delhi because of India's extensive ties with Russia's defence industry.³² This, however, is changing in light of increasing Chinese naval expansionism. In 2024, the German Government adopted the strategy paper "Focus on India" to enhance Indo-German cooperation, particularly in defence and security, and the German Armed Forces conducted joint exercises with their Indian counterparts during *Tarang Shakti* 2024.³³

Finally, Germany's engagement with the Republic of Korea complements this network of partnerships. In addition to shared interests in freedom of navigation, a particular concern shared by both countries is the increasing Russian-North Korean security cooperation. German government officials regularly visit South Korea to forge ties, particularly in defence industrial cooperation and information sharing, as announced during former Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit in 2023.³⁴ Germany is also embedded in peninsular security by joining the United Nations Command in 2024.

A notable shift in Germany's partnerships concerns the Southeast Asian states. Singapore and the Philippines stand out in that regard: As "value-based partners", Germany and

²⁹ Federal Government of Germany, *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the Year 2024*.

³⁰ Nigel Pittaway, "Germany Deploys Eurofighters to Exercise Pitch Black," *Australian Defence Magazine*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.australiandefence.com.au/defence/air/germany-deploys-eurofighters-to-exercise-pitch-black>; Airbus, "Pitch Black 24 – Why the European Air Forces Are Down Under," July 29, 2024, <https://www.airbus.com/en/newsroom/stories/2024-07-pitch-black-24-why-the-european-air-forces-are-down-under>. See also, NATO, "German Air Force Continues Cooperation With Australia During Air-Maritime Integration Exercise," September 23, 2022, https://ac.nato.int/archive/2022/DEU_AF_Ex_KAKADU22.

³¹ Bundeswehr / German Army, "Talismen Sabre 23," 2023, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/army/talismen-sabre-23>.

³² Dharvi Vaid, "India, Germany Push to Boost Defense Ties," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, March 25, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-germany-push-to-boost-defense-ties/a-68662072>. See also, Hans Brandt and Zac Crellin, "Pistorius: Russian Arms for India Not in German Interests," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/pistorius-russian-arms-for-india-not-in-german-interests/a-65827617>.

³³ Federal Government of Germany, "Focus on India," October 16, 2024, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2680288/8909ac2e501ab85d55deff7d1b8b75d/241016-fokus-indien-data.pdf>.

³⁴ Julian Ryall, "Why Are Germany and South Korea Sharing Military Secrets?" *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-germany-and-south-korea-sharing-military-secrets/a-65717773>.

Singapore have elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2024.³⁵ Building on already strong defence ties, regular high-level meetings, joint exercises, and port visits, both countries agreed to further work on a joint defence project, most notably in the maritime domain.³⁶ Particularly significant is Singapore's choice to have Germany's TKMS build its submarines. Singapore ordered two more Type 218SG submarines, bringing the total of Invincible-class submarines in the Republic of Singapore Navy to six.³⁷ A newly developing relationship is Germany's defence cooperation with the Philippines. In response to China's growing harassment of Philippine ships in the South China Sea, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius reaffirmed during his 2024 visit that Germany upholds the 2016 arbitral ruling, which overwhelmingly gave the right to the Philippines and rejected China's claims.³⁸ In 2025, both countries signed a defence agreement to expand cooperation to boost joint defence activities.³⁹ The strengthening relationship was marked by the delivery of two Trinity F90+ drones in 2022, along with an announcement to supply more drones to the Philippine Coast Guard for their operations in the contested waters of the West Philippine Sea.⁴⁰

Germany has also intensified defence cooperation with other South China Sea littoral states, with a clear focus on maritime capacity building. In Malaysia, Germany is supporting coastguard development and improving maritime situational awareness, including through the provision of high-performance surveillance drones, alongside broader security capacity building efforts under the *Enable & Enhance Initiative* since 2023.⁴¹ Malaysia also joined military capacity-building pilot projects, and bilateral staff-level defence talks began in autumn 2022.⁴² Viet Nam has likewise seen expanded engagement: Germany concluded a Defence Ministry cooperation agreement in November 2022, initiated staff-level talks the same year, and launched pilot capacity-

³⁵ "Joint Declaration on the Singapore-Germany Strategic Partnership," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, November 19, 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2024/11/20241118-sg-germany>.

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, "Joint Declaration on the Singapore-Germany Strategic Partnership."

³⁷ Naval News Staff, "Singapore Orders Two Additional Type 218SG Submarines to TKMS," *Naval News*, May 8, 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/event-news/imdex-asia-2025/2025/05/singapore-orders-two-additional-type-218sg-submarines-to-tkms/>.

³⁸ "Germany, Philippines Sign Defence Agreement," *Reuters*, May 15,

2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/germany-philippines-sign-defence-agreement-2025-05-15/>.

³⁹ David Hutt, "Southeast Asia Taps Germany's Defense Industry," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/southeast-asia-taps-germanys-defense-industry/a-72633731>.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Maitem, "Germany to Provide Additional Drones to the Philippine Coast Guard," *Naval News*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/01/germany-to-provide-additional-drones-to-the-philippine-coast-guard/>.

⁴¹ Federal Government of Germany, *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the Year 2024*.

⁴² Federal Government of Germany, *Fortschrittsbericht zur Umsetzung der Leitlinien der Bundesregierung zum Indo-Pazifik für das Jahr 2023 [Progress report on the implementation of the German government's Indo-Pacific guidelines for 2023]* (Federal Government of Germany, 2023), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2617846/a2f4badb670ae89b83b1b3801f733901/230922-leitlinien-indo-pazifik-3-fortschrittsbericht-data.pdf>.

building projects in 2023, with a focus on maritime capabilities.⁴³ Germany resumed ministerial defence dialogues with Indonesia in September 2022 and initiated pilot capacity-building programmes that include the maritime domain.⁴⁴ Thailand resumed its ministerial defence-policy dialogue with Germany in July 2023, expanding consultations and opening up more opportunities for exercises and port calls.⁴⁵

Finally, Germany engages with the region through the EU. An explicit goal of the IPG is to strengthen multilateralism and a regional maritime security architecture based on ASEAN centrality. This cooperation particularly aims at strengthening the legal and normative pillars of the maritime order, to ensure freedom of navigation and a legal framework based on UNCLOS. Germany specifically advocates for a binding Code of Conduct through ASEAN. Under Germany's Presidency of the European Union Council, EU-ASEAN relations were elevated to a Strategic Partnership level in December 2020. Bilaterally, Germany, as the biggest ASEAN donor in the EU, organised various confidence-building initiatives and exchanges for the implementation of UNCLOS.⁴⁶ In 2023, Berlin pledged to set aside funds totalling €22.6 million for this purpose.⁴⁷ Outside of the EU, Germany works on the UN level together with France and the United Kingdom. Together, they issued *Notes Verbales* contesting China's excessive maritime claims.⁴⁸

The evolving role of arms transfers

A key security dimension of these partnerships is the transfer of arms and defence technology (Germany is amongst the five largest arms exporters in the world).⁴⁹ Along with other European powers, it has exported weapons and systems that are likely to affect the material balance of hard power in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the maritime domain⁵⁰: Germany has exported a range of maritime weapons systems and equipment, including submarines, radars, sonar systems, and ship engines, which have likely had a direct impact on the capability of different states to project hard power in the South China

⁴³ Federal Government of Germany, *Fortschrittsbericht zur Umsetzung der Leitlinien der Bundesregierung zum Indo-Pazifik für das Jahr 2023* [Progress report on the implementation of the German government's Indo-Pacific guidelines for 2023].

⁴⁴ Federal Government of Germany.

⁴⁵ Federal Government of Germany.

⁴⁶ Federal Government of Germany.

⁴⁷ Federal Government of Germany.

⁴⁸ These Notes Verbales were trilateral in terms of their signatories. They are an illustration of European cooperation at the UN-level for the South China Sea. See, Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations, "Note Verbale No. 324/2020," September 16,

2020, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mys_12_12_2019/2020_09_16_DEU_N_V_UN_001.pdf; Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the United Nations, "Note Verbale No. 051/25," March 10,

2025, https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/phl1/UK2025Phl.pdf.

⁴⁹ Mathew George et al., "SIPRI Fact Sheet: Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2024," March 2025, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf.

⁵⁰ Felix Heiduk, "An Arms Race in Southeast Asia? Changing Arms Dynamics, Regional Security and the Role of European Arms Exports," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), August 2017, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2017RP10_hdk.pdf.

Sea over the last decades (For an overview of weapon system delivered to the region, see Appendix A).⁵¹ However, while these transfers can strengthen deterrence and contribute to capacity building, they also carry the risk of contributing to competition among regional states.

Germany has been traditionally reluctant to use arms exports as a foreign policy tool. In the past, German arms exports were shaped by economic opportunity and, operated under tight arms controls. However, Germany has recently recalibrated its security policy, reconsidering the use of arms exports in line with its foreign policy objectives, while maintaining a restrictive stance.⁵² Specifically, its recent arms export report states that “When exporting naval equipment to third countries, the international community’s interest in safe sea lanes and the effective exercise of state authority in coastal waters can be an important consideration”.⁵³ The IPG indicates that Berlin will engage in bilateral defence cooperation consistent with export control commitments, while considering the strategic importance of its relationships with other countries.⁵⁴ Minister of Defence Pistorius further reiterated that he wants “to send a signal that we are willing to support our regional partners like Indonesia and India, which includes, for example, the possibility of delivering submarines”.⁵⁵ Germany collaborates with 13 other states in the United States-led initiative Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR) to strengthen Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic efforts to enhance contributions to the global defence industrial base resilience.⁵⁶

This emerging linkage between naval arms exports and Germany’s Indo-Pacific engagement suggests that Germany is beginning to see its defence industry more than before as a strategic instrument. So far, these arms transfers have been more driven by economic interests. They bear potential for Germany’s future engagement with the region,

⁵¹ For an overview of weapon system delivered to the region see Annex.

⁵² Bastian Giegerich, “Germany’s National Security Strategy Previews Change in Arms-Export Policy,” IISS Military Balance Blog, June 30, 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2023/06/germany-s-national-security-strategy-previews-change-in-arms-export-policy/>.

⁵³ Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, *Bericht der Bundesregierung über ihre Exportpolitik für konventionelle Rüstungsgüter im Jahre 2024: Rüstungsexportbericht 2024 [Federal Government Report on its Export Policy for Conventional Arms in 2024: Arms Export Report 2024]* (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, 2024), 13, <https://www.bundeswirtschaftsministerium.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Aussenwirtschaft/ruestungsexportbericht-2024.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=4>.

⁵⁴ Federal Government of Germany, *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Germany-Europe-Asia, Shaping the Twenty-First Century Together* (Federal Government of Germany, 2020), 18, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indopazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Hans Brandt and Zac Crellin, “Pistorius: Russian Arms for India Not in German Interests,” *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/pistorius-russian-arms-for-india-not-in-german-interests/a-65827617>.

⁵⁶ Pistorius, “Partner für den Frieden: Pistorius am Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.”; “Fact Sheet: Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR),” U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Jun/02/2003730341/-1/-1/FACT-SHEET-PARTNERSHIP-FOR-INDO-PACIFIC-INDUSTRIAL-RESILIENCE.PDF>.

but they will be equally limited by Germany's requirements in its immediate neighbourhood.

Conclusion: A cautious outlook in light of Germany's security policy reform

The increase of activities, including the forging of deeper partnerships in the Indo-Pacific shed light on two central points. First, based on the activities, we can assume that Berlin is expecting tensions in the South China Sea to further rise in the near future. Secondly, they indicate the future path of German engagement for the Indo-Pacific that will likely see more cooperation with South China Sea littoral states. Germany's recent recalibration of its security policy, will however, also impose clear limits on what Berlin can contribute.

Germany's assessment of potential escalations in the near future

There are no official statements or clear indications that suggest that Germany expects open war to break out any time soon. However, the growing importance of the South China Sea issue suggests that Berlin recognises rising risks of accidents that could escalate into open conflict. This will likely include China as an actor. Although most of Germany's regional defence engagement aims first and foremost at preventing escalation, support for a maritime order that is based on UNCLOS as well as the willingness to peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea – indicate Berlin's growing distrust in China to find a genuine resolution of the dispute in a way that would not threaten Germany's partner states in the region and impede on freedom of navigation rights. While Germany does not anticipate a major war in its official discourse, it sees a growing danger of incidents in the South China Sea that could affect regional partners such as the Philippines and Vietnam and, indirectly, European trade and security interests.

Nevertheless, there should be no illusions about any substantial contributions on the ground should open war break out. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Germany has been undergoing a fundamental shift in its security policy. Former chancellor Olaf Scholz announced the *Zeitenwende* (historical turn or watershed) in Germany's security policy, and his successor Friedrich Merz declared to do "whatever it takes" to transform the *Bundeswehr* into the EU's most capable army by exempting it from the debt brake.⁵⁷ In light of this drastic plan to increase defence spending, the German Navy will receive a much-needed upgrade.⁵⁸

Still, the *Zeitenwende* has a contradictory impact on Germany's commitment to the South China Sea. On the one hand, the political and public awareness of security-related issues

⁵⁷ Andreas Noll, "Germany Eyes Strongest EU Army by 2031," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, May 18, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-armed-forces-bundeswehr-eu-defense-spending-nato-trump/a-72570394>; Chris Lunday and Jürgen Klöckner, "Germany Moves to Overhaul Debt Rules to Unleash Major Defense Spending," *Politico*, March 4, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-unveils-e500-billion-defense-plan-as-security-threats-mount/>.

⁵⁸ "Der Kurs für die Marine ab 2035 [The Course for the Navy from 2035 Onwards]," *Bundeswehr / German Navy*, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/marine/aktuelles/zielbild-marine-2035-5600748>.

has grown. Germany's engagement in extra-regional security and defence is likely to receive more governmental and public approval. Defence Minister Pistorius assured that Germany cannot afford to neglect the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁹ This has the potential to gradually improve Germany's ability to sustain deployments to distant regions, including the Indo-Pacific, although these improvements will materialise only over the long term. In contrast to the preferences of the second Donald Trump administration, these activities indicate that Germany does not accept a burden-sharing framework scenario in which the United States and regional states focus on Indo-Pacific security, while Europe focuses only on its immediate neighbourhood.⁶⁰

On the other hand, the National Security Strategy prioritises national and alliance defence as its core mission. In view of the immediate Russian threat, the strategic and operational focus of the German armed forces is to be fully oriented once again toward its immediate neighbourhood and NATO commitments. Further extending Germany's presence in the South China Sea beyond biannual deployments might bind too many of the navy's already restricted forces. Similarly, despite deepening regional defence and security partnerships, it remains open whether Germany will increase its arms transfers in the future since Germany's defence industry has a full order pipeline for Germany's military reform.⁶¹

Given these constraints and the need to balance immediate security threats in Europe with global commitments, Berlin should focus on those forms of engagement that most effectively and efficiently serve German interests in the Indo-Pacific. In the South China Sea, Germany's core interests lie in freedom of navigation, the security of maritime trade routes, and the preservation of peace amongst states.

Together with regional and extra-regional maritime actors, Germany has expanded its engagement through naval deployments and exercises, demonstrating its shared commitment to maintaining a UNCLOS-based regional maritime order. Such deployments serve an important signalling function and constitute a form of naval diplomacy. However, they are costly and difficult to sustain. Expanded or more frequent missions risk binding forces that are required to deter the immediate Russian threat in Europe. **To enhance their political impact without increasing force commitments,**

⁵⁹ "Bundeswehr für Sicherheit und Frieden im Indo-Pazifik [German Armed Forces for Security and Peace in the Indo-Pacific]," Bundeswehr, 2024, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/meldungen/bundeswehr-sicherheit-frieden-indo-pazifik-2024>.

⁶⁰ This is in sharp contrast to the preferences of the second Trump administration. For example, the US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth declared after a NATO Minister of Defense meeting in February 2025 that "The U.S. is prioritizing deterring war with China in the Pacific, recognizing the reality of scarcity, and making the resourcing tradeoffs to ensure deterrence does not fail." And that "As the United States prioritizes its attention to these threats, European allies must lead from the front." The US. and Europe could "establish a division of labor that maximizes our comparative advantages in Europe and Pacific respectively." See: Pete Hegseth, "Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered)," US Department of War, February 12, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>.

⁶¹ David Hutt, "Southeast Asia Taps Germany's Defense Industry," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/southeast-asia-taps-germanys-defense-industry/a-72633731>.

this signalling could be strengthened by more coordinated, mission-defined naval deployments at the EU level. Rather than relying on sporadic, nationally branded deployments, Germany could encourage regular joint or rotational operations conducted with other European navies under a common EU framework.

At the same time, Germany's most impactful contribution to stability in the South China Sea is likely to lie less in acting as a direct regional security provider or in serving as a deterrent naval power, but more in its role as a maritime security facilitator and promoter of maritime norms. This implies, in addition to more joint European deployments, a focus on enabling and supporting regional actors through capacity building. Germany already maintains a wide range of defense cooperation activities in the maritime domain, but these efforts often lack a clearly defined end state regarding Germany's strategic objectives. **Specifically, naval arms and technology transfers should be considered not only through economic or industrial lenses, but also as strategic tools that can indirectly serve German interests.** Transfers to South China Sea littoral states could be linked to commitments to uphold freedom of navigation and maritime passage rights and obligations under UNCLOS. Framing and coordinating maritime security cooperation *for* these normative pillars of the regional maritime order rather than *against* China resonates better with littoral states' agendas. South China Sea states avoid, to varying degrees, confronting Beijing directly, as such actions are quickly perceived as siding with the United States amid rising great-power rivalry. Therefore, many regional countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, are seeking a broader range of diplomatic partnerships amid intensifying tensions between the United States and China. Consequently, Germany should focus on maritime security cooperation that supports regional stability and addresses both traditional and non-traditional security threats.

Additionally, Germany should further advance its cooperation with regional middle-power countries that maintain a sustained naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. The security partnerships with Australia, Japan, and South Korea already connect Germany to central regional middle powers. The regional impact of these middle powers, most notably in the South China Sea, is likely to grow even further in the future. Besides additional agreements that facilitate access and logistical support for German – or European – deployments, especially joint projects in defense-industrial and technological cooperation offer a promising pathway for synergies across theaters.

All things considered, we can expect the recent German South China Sea policy to continue in the near future. However, German forces will remain bound to more engagement with NATO's Northern Flank. Nevertheless, Germany will continue to deepen existing partnerships in information sharing and technology transfers. The rising security efforts regarding the South China Sea form the foundation of an integrated approach that seeks to influence the regional maritime environment with limited means.

Appendix A: Selection of German arms exports** (2010-2024) with maritime component

RECIPIENT	DESIGNATION	DESCRIPTION	NUMBERS DELIVERED	DELIVERY YEARS
<i>Australia</i>	ship engine 8001-11000	ship engine	8	2014, 2015, 2021
<i>Brunei*</i>	FIB-25	patrol boat	1	2011
	OPV-80 COR -	corvette	4	2011, 2014
	FPB-41	patrol boat	2	2010
<i>China*</i>	ship engine 6001-8000	ship engine	8	2013, 2014, 2015
	ship engine 8001-11000	ship engine	52	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2024
<i>India</i>	ACTAS	anti-submarine sonar	12	2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024
	Do-228MP -	maritime patrol aircraft	24	2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021
	ship engine 11001-15000	ship engine	10	2010, 2011, 2013
	ship engine 500-1000	ship engine	20	2017, 2019, 2021, 2022
<i>Indonesia*</i>	KaleidoScope	submarine sonar	3	2017, 2018, 2021
	MHV-60	MCM ship	2	2023
	ship engine 1001-2500	ship engine	36	2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018, 2021
	ship engine 4001-6000	ship engine	12	2014, 2019, 2023
<i>Japan</i>	ship engine 6001-8000	ship engine	12	2022, 2023, 2024
<i>Malaysia*</i>	DSQS-24	anti-submarine sonar	2	2013, 2014
	MEKO-A100	patrol ship/frigate	2	2010
<i>New Zealand</i>	ship engine 2501-4000	ship engine	4	2020
	ship engine 8001-11000	ship engine	4	2010
<i>Philippines*</i>	Hunter sonar	anti-submarine sonar	1	2023
	ship engine 2501-4000	ship engine	4	2016, 2017
	ship engine 4001-6000	ship engine	8	2020, 2021
	TRS-3D	air/sea-search radar	2	2020, 2021
<i>Singapore</i>	ship engine 4001-6000	ship engine	16	2017, 2018, 2019
<i>South Korea</i>	Type-218	submarine	2	2023, 2024
	ship engine 2501-4000	ship engine	18	2018, 2021, 2023, 2024
	ship engine 4001-6000	ship engine	3	2017, 2018, 2021

	ship engine 6001-8000	ship engine	50	2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018
	ship engine 8001-11000	ship engine	4	2016
	Type-214	submarine	6	2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020
<i>Taiwan*</i>	ship engine 2501-4000	ship engine	60	2010, 2011
	ship engine 4001-6000	ship engine	8	2014, 2021, 2023
<i>Thailand</i>	ACTAS	anti-submarine sonar	1	2018
	ASO-712	anti-submarine sonar	1	2018
	ship engine 4001-6000	ship engine	4	2013, 2019
	ship engine 6001-8000	ship engine	2	2018

Source: Author's compilation based on SIPRI's Arms Transfers Database:

<https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

* South China Sea littoral state

** The table refers to actually delivered arms and does not include deals that have been announced but not yet delivered.