

Militarization

Adventure Trip to the Pacific

Uwe Hoering, March 2021

This summer, the frigate *Bayern* will set sail and spend several months cruising in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. There would be nothing special about this if it were not a delicate mission. "German Navy shall help to curb China's expansionism", was the headline of the *Handelsblatt*¹, a leading German business paper. The Ministry of Defense tweeted somewhat more restrained on March 5 that the deployment of the warship was merely a "sign" to fly the flag where Germany's "values and interests are affected."² The *Bayern* is intended to lend substance to the "Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific"³ adopted by the German federal government last September and to the pronouncements of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Minister of Defense, that the federal government "will expand its commitment to security policy to the Indo-Pacific".

However, it's hard to imagine that the Middle Kingdom will be impressed by a 25-year-old frigate. But the *Bayern* is not acting in isolation. British, French and Dutch warships are also increasing their presence in the Indo-Pacific in the name of "freedom of navigation." And the powerful Pacific fleet of the USA has already been in action for quite some time.

Through the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asian waters and the Pacific Ocean run the most essential trade routes between Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. Serious observers, however, doubt that freedom of navigation is actually threatened by China at present - on the contrary: As the most powerful trading nation, it has the greatest self-interest in maintaining it.

Just to fly the flag?

It will be a cruise to one of the world's most volatile flashpoint areas. In the conflict over control of the Southeast Asian waters between China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan, usually referred to as the South China Sea, skirmishes between the coast guards of the littoral states are becoming increasingly frequent. The Chinese government provided the impetus for this in 2009 when it presented a map with the so-called 'Nine-dash line'⁴, a somewhat loose demarcation line with which it underpins territorial claims to 90 percent of the waters. Major natural resources are also supposed to be located there. In addition, the government in Beijing has created facts by transforming rocky reefs and sandbanks into military sites. And the decision by the international arbitration court in The Hague in the summer of 2016 that its claims violate UN maritime law was brusquely rejected.

The armada, in which the *Bayern* is now a participant, is intended, under U.S. leadership, to reinforce European interests in a "rules-based order" and the validity of "shared values" - and to put China in its place. Defense minister Kramp-Karrenbauer already compared Beijing's claims in May of last year with Russia's intervention in the Ukraine: "We should assess some events in the Indo-Pacific in the same way," she was quoted by the *Handelsblatt*, among others - which at

least provoked objections from the coalition partner SPD⁵. The trip by the *Bayern* is thus more than a symbolic gesture, not just a "sign" but an - albeit toothless - participation in a containment strategy, so the *Handelsblatt* is right.

Pivot to Asia

The confrontation in the South China Sea became one of the sites of the 'Systemic Conflict' already some time ago, similar to the Corona pandemic or digitalization. Since the 2008 financial crisis, which weakened the U.S. and strengthened China, the U.S. government responded to China's geopolitical self-confidence in an increasingly confrontational manner, which under Secretary of State Hilary Clinton was euphemistically referred to as a "Pivot to Asia".

This includes accelerated armament, which is answered by Beijing with increasing military expenditures as well. Unlike China, the U.S. and the former colonial powers France and Great Britain have a dense network of military bases in the region. U.S. manufacturers are already betting on an arms race, which could then also boost German exports of military equipment.

This also included efforts to strengthen anti-China alliances and to forge new ones, which, however, suffered setbacks under President Trump. These include efforts by the U.S., Japan, Australia and India to build a common Indo-Pacific front. President Macron is trying to connect to this 'Quad' with his embrace of India's fundamentalist-authoritarian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in order to establish France as an Indo-Pacific power. And starting this summer, Germany with *Bayern* and other NATO countries will be involved in another 'Out of area' operation. This time "Germany's security" shall be defended in the Indo-Pacific.

However, it is a balancing act for Berlin: The military demonstration contradicts the desire and efforts of the German government to further expand economic activities with its partner China. It could further complicate the relationship and lead to unpredictable entanglements in conflicts. The situation in the region is anything but clear, the alliances are in flux, the actors are "frenemies," sometimes friends, sometimes enemies.

Show up or Show down

While littoral states such as Vietnam and the Philippines and the Southeast Asian regional grouping ASEAN are more interested in negotiations with the government in Beijing over the South China Sea, the internationalization and militarization of the conflict is turning it into a live fuse. After all, since early January, the Chinese Coast Guard has been given authority to open fire at foreign vessels. It can only be hoped that the frigate commander will be sensible enough not to sail through the strait between mainland China and the Republic of Taiwan, which is regarded as a renegade province, and thus cause a diplomatic scandal like the French frigate *Vendémiaire* two years ago, or to take part in targeted provocations by the U.S. Navy.

As a reminder: The pretext for direct U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War was the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin Incident" in August 1964, in which Vietnamese boats allegedly fired on U.S. ships.

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)

¹ <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/sichere-seewege-die-bundeswehr-soll-helfen-chinas-expansionsdrang-zu-baendigen/26594722.html>

² https://twitter.com/bmvg_bundeswehr/status/1367827171474108418

³ <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380500/33f978a9d4f511942c241eb4602086c1/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine_dash_line

⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.de/politik/welt/deutschland-will-im-pazifik-staerke-gegen-china-demonstrieren-der-plan-koennte-am-streit-um-eine-einzige-fregatte-scheitern/>