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Germany's show of force in the Indo-Pacific

The frigate Bayern (Bavaria), one of Germany's largest warships, has been on its way to the Indo-Pacific since Monday.



German frigate Bayern

With a total journey of more than 30,000 nautical miles, the operation is one of the most comprehensive by the German navy since the end of the Second World War. The Bayern travelled through the North Sea and English Channel before traversing the northeast Atlantic, passing through the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean Sea. From there, it will continue through the Suez Canal and Red Sea, through the Indian Ocean and into the western Pacific, which is scheduled to be reached in the autumn.

The most politically and militarily explosive part of the trip is the return leg. This is when the frigate will pass through the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. The latter, owing to its economic and geostrategic significance, is referred to as the “aorta of the Indo-Pacific region.”

The South China Sea is at the heart of the US military buildup against China. Under President Biden, Washington has intensified its provocative operations to secure “freedom of navigation” for shipping in the waters claimed by China in the South China Sea and is preparing to install offensive missiles along the coasts of several densely populated islands in the region, including Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines.

Germany’s intervention into the Indo-Pacific not only heightens the danger of war in the region, it also initiates a new stage in the return of German militarism.

In her speech on the occasion of the Bayern’s departure from the town of Wilhelmshaven, Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer declared explicitly that the purpose of the mission was to enforce the geostrategic and economic interests of German imperialism in the region. “As a major trader and exporter in the region, we have a strong interest in the securing of free trade routes,” she proclaimed.

Although Kramp-Karrenbauer asserted that Germany’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific is “not against something or anyone,” her speech was a direct attack on China. “The message is clear, we are raising the flag for our interests and values,” she said. This is “important,” because “it is a reality for our partners in the Indo-Pacific that the seas are restricted and sea lanes are no longer secure.” Experience shows that “territorial claims are being made based on the law of the strongest.”

The defence minister threatened Beijing directly, commenting, “We will cooperate with China where we can and push back where we must. Because we will firmly resist anyone who tries to ignore international law and impose their own new rules of the game on us and our partners.” Although the headwinds are “stiffening, we know how to set our sails against it. We will not allow ourselves to be diverted from our course.”

Kramp-Karrenbauer openly stated what this “course” consists of. With this mission, “the soldiers are implementing practically and visibly what the German government laid out in its Indo-Pacific doctrine,” she said.

The strategy paper published by the Foreign Ministry in September 2020 declared the Indo-Pacific to be the “key to shaping the international order in the 21st century.” It also clearly formulated Germany’s claim to play a leadership role in the region. “The Himalayas and the Straits of Malacca may appear a long way off. But our prosperity and geopolitical influence in the decades to come will depend in particular upon how we cooperate with the states of the Indo-Pacific.” As a “globally active trading nation” Germany cannot “content itself with the role of a spectator.”

Kramp-Karrenbauer’s great power speech culminated with the declaration, “From Wilhelmshaven through the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, to the South China Sea and the Pacific, the IPD [Indo-Pacific Deployment] is an example of how Germany is taking responsibility.” The “more fundamental significance of the mission” goes “beyond the coming seven months.” It stands for “Germany’s active engagement for the rules-based order and the increased strategic significance of the sea.”

Berlin’s mad grand plan to confront nuclear-armed China in the South China Sea and reassert itself as a naval and world power stands in the militaristic traditions of German imperialism.

On July 27, 1900, Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II held his notorious “Hun Speech” in Bremerhaven. On the occasion of the departure of the German East Asia Corps, which was mobilised to brutally suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China, he declared that the German military had emerged in the course of “thirty years of faithful peaceful labour.”

Germany’s head of state accused China of “overturning the law of nations” and of having “mocked the sacredness of the envoy, the duties of hospitality in a way unheard of in world history...” Wilhelm II then made his notorious threat, “Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.”

The aggression was the prelude to the First World War. The intervention against the Boxer Rebellion, initially launched as a joint operation, intensified the conflicts between the imperialist powers, culminating in August 1914 in what was at the time the greatest mass slaughter in world history. The German Empire had launched a massive rearming programme in the preceding years, including the so-called “flotilla laws” focusing specifically on the navy.

The ruling class is working towards this end once again. The federal government’s current munitions report includes the purchasing of several warships. These include the building of four multi-purpose ships of the 180 class, an option to purchase a further two, the bringing into service of a frigate of the Baden-Württemberg 125 class, five class 130 corvettes, and two class 212 Common Design submarines.

The cost of this rearmament is gigantic. For the purchase of the four multi-purpose ships alone, €5.27 billion has been set aside. This makes it the navy’s largest project since the massive naval armament drive during the Second World War. And this is only the beginning. In March 2019, Kramp-Karrenbauer and German chancellor Angela Merkel spoke out in favour of a plan to build Germany’s own aircraft carrier.

As early as 2014, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) analysed the objective forces underlying the return of German militarism and warned of its implications in a resolution. Just a few months after former foreign minister and current German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier told the Munich Security Conference that Germany is “too large and economically strong to comment on world politics from the sidelines,” we wrote:

History is returning with a vengeance. Almost 70 years after the crimes of the Nazis and its defeat in World War II, the German ruling class is once again adopting the imperialist great power politics of the Kaiser’s Empire and Hitler... The propaganda of the post-war era—that Germany had learnt from the terrible crimes of the Nazis, had “arrived at the West,” had embraced a peaceful foreign policy, and had developed into a stable democracy—is exposed as lies. German imperialism is once again showing its real colours as it emerged historically, with all of its aggressiveness at home and abroad.

Seven years later, it is clear how correct this assessment was. Despite its unspeakable crimes in two world wars, the German ruling elite sees no limits in the 21st century on the pursuit of its imperialist interests. After having sacrificed tens of thousands of people on the altar of profit during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now preparing together with its imperialist allies for major military conflicts.

The threat of a catastrophic third world war imparts tremendous urgency to the construction of an anti-war movement of the international working class, which would aim at overcoming the source of war in the capitalist profit system and establishing a global socialist society.

The SGP condemns the sending of the German frigate to the Indo-Pacific in the strongest terms. We will now redouble our struggle in the federal election campaign to arm the widespread opposition among workers and young people to militarism, fascism and war with a socialist programme. While the Left Party and Greens stand ready to support the German war drive as parties of government, we call in our election statement for “An immediate halt to all foreign interventions! The dissolution of NATO and the German army! Billions for education and health care instead of rearmament and war.”

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