

# *German and Korean Approaches to the Indo-Pacific: Middle Power Strategies for a Global Key Region*

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## Abstract

This article analyses and compares the Indo-Pacific strategy papers of Germany (2020) and South Korea (2022). Both are democratic industrial, trading, and welfare nations as well as middle powers that have recently adjusted their foreign policies. There are also numerous parallels in their turn towards the Indo-Pacific. China is their largest trading partner, which comes with numerous useful but also critical dependencies and interdependencies. At the same time, both Seoul and Berlin are heavily dependent on the US in terms of security policy and are linked to it politically, economically, and socially in many ways. Their Indo-Pacific concepts reflect this balancing act, the current geopoliticisation, and the desire to reduce existing dependencies, diversify, and have a mitigating effect on the regional and global rivalry between the US and China. South Korea and Germany would be ideal partners who could coordinate their goals for the region and cooperate in many ways.

## Article History:

Submitted: 05.06.2024

Accepted: 10.11.2024

Published: 04.02.2025

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## Keywords

Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific Strategies, Germany, South Korea, German Foreign Policy, Korean Foreign Policy, ROK, Middle Powers, Geopolitics

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See Mehler, Andreas, "Komparative Areaforschung in der Vergleichenden Politikwissenschaft," in *Handbuch Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, ed. Hans-Joachim Lauth, Marianne Kneuer, Gert Pickel (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016), 92.

2

"Eurocentrism" is understood as the conscious or unconscious assumption that the historical, political, social and cultural development of European and North American nation states, including their values and institutions, represent the natural and universally valid model or ideal against which all other state, social, political, and cultural paths of development are measured, compared and evaluated. See Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, "Geteilte Geschichten—Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt," in *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Idem (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2002), 12; Rainer Tetzlaff, *Afrika: Eine Einführung in Geschichte, Politik und Gesellschaft* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 64.

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See Dan Krause, *Südliche Demokratien und der Streit über die internationale Ordnung: Analyse der Positionen Indiens und Südafrikas zur Responsibility to Protect* (Opladen/Berlin/Toronto: Budrich, 2024), 26-27; Mehler, *Comparative Area Studies*, 93.

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Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas," Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, New Delhi, 22 August 2007, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

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See Felix Heiduk and Gudrun Wacker, "Vom Asien-Pazifik zum Indo-Pazifik: Bedeutung, Umsetzung und Herausforderung," *SWP Research Paper*, no. 9 (May 2020); Michael Staack, "Die Debatte fehlt," *Zur Sache BW* 39, no. 1 (2021): 53, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/resource/blob/5083720/f0b94c0c6e0cb95283cfc0d6ddeb438/zur-sache-bw-39-2021-data.pdf>.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the term "Indo-Pacific" has become a recognised part of political discussions on this global key region. It is both, a geographical reference and a (geo-)political concept. Other concepts, such as the previously used "Asia-Pacific", have largely been replaced by it. The construction of such terms is not without problems. They are frequently external social constructs and attributions, which are also often historically and colonially charged. Such categorisations of global spaces give the impression of homogeneity or commonalities between the states, societies, and cultures located there, which do not exist or require theoretical justification as analytical categories (e.g. economics, politics, history and culture).<sup>1</sup> Due to their emergence in a Western context, they are also associated—keyword "Eurocentrism"<sup>2</sup>—with corresponding conscious or unconscious ideas and assumptions that are not shared or understood identically by many states outside the Euro-Atlantic area. There is a risk of fundamental misunderstandings, incorrect analyses, and systematic misconceptions.<sup>3</sup> Finally, such terms and concepts are often linked to current ideological or power-political interests.

The "Indo-Pacific" is also a geopolitical construct by different actors with differing contents. After Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first spoke of a "Confluence of the Two Seas"<sup>4</sup> (Indian and Pacific Oceans) in New Delhi in 2007, the idea and the term "Indo-Pacific" repeatedly appeared in Japanese, Australian, and US strategy papers and statements by leading politicians. While the conceptual connection between the two areas and the "pivot to Asia" had already been announced under President Barack Obama, Donald Trump specified the Indo-Pacific as the central location of Sino-American disputes. The concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which was presented under his administration at the APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Hanoi in 2017 and formulated in a State Department strategy paper in 2019, was clearly aimed at limiting China's power and influence and rejecting Chinese ideas of a (new) order for the region. It combined existing US policy with the perception of an increasing strategic rivalry between the two superpowers, which jeopardised and openly challenged the US' previous supremacy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. China, which conversely is striving for an "Asianisation" of regional order and security structures under the slogan "Asia for Asians" and is thus questioning the previous role of the US in the region, understood the US concept as a containment strategy targeted directly against itself, which it then categorically rejected.<sup>5</sup>

Even though China still rejects the term "Indo-Pacific", more and more states and organisations are using it. In many respects, it seems suitable for capturing, summarising and describing current geopolitical, regulatory, and security policy developments and phenomena in the region, as well as interconnected economic and political developments, spaces, (re)emergences, and interdependencies of global

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See Rajeshwari Krishnamurthy and Richard Ghiasy, "The Transitioning Security Order in the Indo-Pacific: Furthering India-EU & Triangular Collaboration," *ICPS Special Report*, no. 216 (March 2023): 1-4, [https://www.ipcs.org/issue\\_select.php?recNo=6164](https://www.ipcs.org/issue_select.php?recNo=6164); Hanns Günther Hilpert, "Zeitenwende in der EU-Handelspolitik: Chancen der Diversifizierung im Indo-Pazifik," *SWP-Comment*, no. 61 (October 2022): 3, doi:10.18449/2022A61; David Brewster and C. Raja Mohan, "Germany in the Indo-Pacific: Securing Interests Through Partnerships," *Foreign Information*, no. 10 (March 2019): 2-3, <https://www.kas.de/de/web/auslandsinformationen/artikel/detail/-/content/deutschland-im-indo-pazifik-1>.

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See Heiduk/Wacker, "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific," 29-30.

**8**

See *Ibid.*, 19.

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For the concept, definition and debate on "middle powers" see for instance Eduard Jordaán, "The concept of a middle power in international relations: distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers," *Politikon*, no. 2 (November 2003): 165-181, DOI: 10.1080/0258934032000147282; Enrico Fels, "Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific? The Rise of China, Sino-US Competition and Regional Middle Power Allegiance," (Springer International, 2017), 195-223.

significance. Geographically and politically, the concept combines, among other things, the resurgence of China with the enormous increase in the importance of India and the role of the ASEAN states (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). The term describes the growing together and the increased economic and strategic importance of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Indian Ocean in particular, as a central connecting route between Europe, East Africa, the Middle East, South, Southeast, and East Asia, as well as the Pacific and Oceania, is attracting enormous global attention.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the US, many other players have outlined their ideas on the Indo-Pacific in strategic policy papers, including Japan, India, Australia, ASEAN, the European Union, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and the Republic of Korea (ROK). These concepts, which define the relevant area in a geographically disparate manner, also vary considerably in terms of content. They contain different concepts of order and emphasise thematic aspects such as security and defence, inclusivity, connectivity and infrastructure, or economic and multilateral political cooperation in very different ways. For example, the approaches of India, South Korea, and ASEAN—despite some considerable tensions and differences with the People's Republic of China—are much more inclusive and cooperative than the FOIP concept of the US. The ASEAN "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) even includes China directly and positions itself against a strategy of containment towards Beijing.<sup>7</sup> The strategies of most actors are not static but developing and changing. For example, Japan has endeavoured—even after criticism from Asian partners—to make its vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", which was originally strongly designed as a containment strategy towards China and closely aligned with the US, more inclusive and cooperative, including towards the People's Republic.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the strategy papers on the Indo-Pacific presented by Berlin in 2020 and Seoul in 2022 are highly relevant. Both countries are important middle powers<sup>9</sup>, have close economic ties with China and are heavily dependent on the US in terms of security policy. Germany and South Korea alone do not have sufficient capabilities, resources, power and influence to decisively shape developments in the region. However, as important middle powers, they possess at least regionally relevant military, economic and diplomatic capabilities, status and resources as well as soft power. Their possibilities, resources and power are limited and do not come close to those of the major powers. However, with the appropriate will, interest or necessity, they can develop considerable shaping power in individual areas. They also do have the means and possibilities to strengthen certain positions and, together with partners and international organisations, attempt to play a more active role in shaping the regional order. For example, Germany could strengthen its leverage in the region through fundamental and sectoral cooperation with South Korea, and/or by utilising the EU's diplomatic, trade and regulatory power and both states by attracting additional partners. Their strategy papers reflect interesting readjustments to their foreign policies and the declared intention to turn more towards the Indo-Pacific region and to exert influence.

So, what do the two countries' strategies for the region look like, and how are their intentions reflected? How did the papers come about, what significance do they have, and which aspects should be emphasised in particular? How realistic are the strategies formulated, are they backed up with resources and how are they implemented? What are the differences and similarities between Korea and Germany and where is there room for co-operation and in which areas is this urgently needed?

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The Federal Government, "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, Germany—Europe—Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together," 01 September 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien-1--data.pdf>.

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See Michael Staack, "Die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland," in *Einführung in die Internationale Politik*, ed. Idem (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter/Oldenbourg, 2023), 217.

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The Federal Government, "Strategy on China", 13 July 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2608580/49d50fecc479304c3da2e2079c55e106/china-strategie-en-data.pdf>.

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Government of the Netherlands, "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia," 13 November 2020, <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>.

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See The Federal Government, "Resolutely committed to peace and security," Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, Berlin, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

This article is located in the field of foreign policy analysis. Methodologically, the policy-oriented study uses document and content analysis as well as comparative analysis. It draws on government policy documents, strategy papers and secondary sources, in order to address the questions and research interests. This also involves identifying and interpreting the values and interests behind the rhetoric and linking rhetoric with action and practice.

## 2. The German Approach

### 2.1. Origin, character, background of the document

On 1 September 2020, the German Federal Government became the second EU member state after France to publish its own strategic statements and ideas on the Indo-Pacific (Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, PGIP) for the first time under the heading "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, Germany—Europe—Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together".<sup>10</sup> The comprehensive document was created as a joint concept of the German government and replaced previous papers by the Federal Foreign Office on East Asia and South Asia. Germany thus adopted the term "Indo-Pacific" for the first time, recognising the growing importance of the Indian Ocean and India, and ended the previous, relatively one-sided, strategic-political focus on China.<sup>11</sup> Germany's strategy for the Indo-Pacific region is clearly designed to be inclusive, incorporating China despite its increasing distance, and aims for a co-operative multilateralism in which ASEAN plays a central role. It also emphasises the embedding of the German strategy and foreign policy towards the region in a European framework and its coordination with EU partners. During its EU Council Presidency, Germany actively worked on a joint EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific, which was published in September 2021.

The deliberate choice of the term "guidelines" instead of "strategy" aptly describes the character of the German document. Genuine strategy papers, especially those relating to security and defence policy, represent a relatively new discipline for Germany. It would also make sense to derive a regional, sub-strategy such as the Indo-Pacific strategy, from an overarching basic document, such as the first National Security Strategy (NSS), which in this case was only published two years later, in 2023. Germany's current "China Strategy" followed the overarching National Security Strategy in this sense.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the European Union still lacked a coordinated joint strategy for the Indo-Pacific in 2020, meaning that the German guidelines represented an important interim step. Interestingly, the Dutch foundation document "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia" was also published shortly afterwards.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the European context of member state foreign policy, it also emphasises an inclusive policy approach for the region.

As an overall document of the federal government, with input from various ministries, the PGIPs are a compromise document, in Germany even more so than in other countries. This is partly due to the nature of the German political system, which is characterised by rather slow compromises, institutionalised federalism, two- and three-party coalitions, and a pronounced departmental principle. Despite the proclaimed "Zeitenwende"<sup>14</sup> of 2022, Germany remains a country

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The Federal Government, "Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific", 2.

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See Julia Gurol-Haller, "Germany's Role in the East Asian Security Architecture: Towards More Proactive Diplomatic Engagement?," *APLN Policy Brief*, no.94 (January 2023): 6-7, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PB-94-Gurol-Haller.pdf>.

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See Staack, "Die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik," 207; 220.

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See The Federal Foreign Office, "Speech by Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier at the 50th Munich Security Conference", 01 February 2014, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/140201-bm-muesiko/259556>; see also Wolfgang Ischinger and Dirk Messner (eds.) *Deutschlands neue Verantwortung: Die Zukunft der deutschen und europäischen Außen-, Entwicklungs- und Sicherheitspolitik* (Berlin: ECON, 2017).

with a historically determined, special foreign policy and strategic culture that is only changing slowly. At 72 pages—the Netherlands manages with ten pages—the guidelines are very detailed, offer a comprehensive presentation of German interests and principles in the region and cover seven policy areas in detail. In addition to corresponding descriptions, there are also many desirable aspects and numerous generalisations on six pages each. The meticulous listing of almost all planned or ongoing measures, projects, and initiatives is at the expense of clarity and gives the impression of a laboured record of activities. What is new, however, is Germany's first clearly articulated claim to a (co-)shaping role in security and peace policy in the region, which should now also be acknowledged.

## 2.2. *Aspiration and function of the guidelines*

The foreword already clearly recognises the global significance of the Indo-Pacific and what the German government believes is at stake in the region: "It is already foreseeable today that, more than anywhere else, the shape of tomorrow's international order will be decided in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>15</sup> Geographically, the Indo-Pacific is defined in its broadest geographical dimension (from East Africa to Western America and the South Pacific states and islands). It is the declared aim of the guidelines to create a greater awareness of the region and to publicise Germany's diverse relationships, connections, and dependencies on developments in the region. The conceptual shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific region goes hand in hand with a changed awareness of the opportunities and risks in relation to China as well as the geopoliticisation of areas that were previously not considered central to security, such as economy, trade, energy, and connectivity.<sup>16</sup> However, it also reflects the realisation of a growing divergence of interests across the Atlantic as well as a decreasing predictability of the US government and a limited predictability of US foreign policy; only somewhat reliable for the respective term of office.<sup>17</sup>

Like comparable documents, the guidelines fulfil several functions. For example, they are also a form of diplomatic and strategic communication. They signal to partners, competitors, and rivals inside and outside the Indo-Pacific that Germany is aware of the region, its importance, and the diversity of its tasks, and that it is prepared to do more and cooperate with partners. Overall, the guidelines are a commitment to a more independent German and European role. However, comparable commitments—keyword "Germany's new foreign policy or responsibility"<sup>18</sup> or European announcements for a more coherent foreign and security policy—have often been followed by steps that were too slow and too insubstantial in the past. As a result, Germany and the EU were and are only partially able to maintain peace and security on their own continent and have left some of their foreign policy responsibilities to the US. Expectations of the EU and Germany should therefore not be exaggerated, especially in the region.

## 2.3. *Keypoints*

After naming the interests, principles, and previous initiatives, the political areas in which Germany wants to become particularly involved are listed. Rhetorically, the focus is clearly on multilateralism. This is addressed both as a method and as

[19](#)

The Federal Government, “Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific,” 23.

[20](#)

Ibid, 24.

[21](#)

See *ibid*, 35-39.

[22](#)

Ibid, 9.

[23](#)

For a critique of the concept of value partnerships see Felix Heiduk, “Deutschlands Wertepartnerschaften im Indo-Pazifik,” *SWP Research Paper*, no. 2 (February 2024).

[24](#)

See The Federal Government, “Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific,” 47-51.

a normative goal (rules-based, inclusive multilateralism) and runs like a common thread through the entire document. “Especially in times of increasing power rivalries and tensions, multilateralism has a special role to play in peace and stability policy.”<sup>19</sup> The rules-based order required for this is to be strengthened by, among other things, expanding relations and intensifying cooperation with ASEAN and other multilateral institutions such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Mekong River Commission (MRC) or the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). ASEAN, in particular, and its cooperation and dialogue formats are seen as central to maintaining a regional, rules-based order.

“The German government has a great interest in strengthening ASEAN’s ability to act (“ASEAN Centrality”)—also as the core of confidence-building and multilaterally structured cooperation with China, Japan, South Korea, the US, Russia, India and Australia, among others, that goes beyond Southeast Asia.”<sup>20</sup>

Germany’s influence, both globally and in the Indo-Pacific region, is strongly characterised by its role in trade, economic, and technological issues, as well as its political significance in Europe. Stability, security, a rules-based order and, above all, the peaceful management of the Sino-American rivalry are essential for the realisation of German interests and goals. The German government seems to have been aware of the typical middle power limits of influence and resources even before the Russian war against Ukraine. In the area of security and defence, the intention to strengthen dialogue, exchange and cooperation with various partners and organisations, including in global contexts (UN peacekeeping), is therefore emphasised. The focus is also more on areas such as combating and curbing piracy, counter-terrorism cooperation, measures against drug and human trafficking and illegal fishing, as well as strengthening local regimes and recognised legislation, such as the “Convention on the Law of the Sea”, and less on hard security and defence issues.<sup>21</sup> In this context, the intention to counter disinformation by authoritarian actors in the region and to strengthen the rule of law is also expressed.

Despite the fundamental openness of the German approach and the desire to expand relations with various regional actors, the special position of democracies and value partners is emphasised: “In this context, the close alliance with the democracies and value partners of the region is of particular importance.”<sup>22</sup> However, the concept of “value partners” in German foreign policy has remained strategically vague and normatively unclear or contradictory up to this day, despite being used many times.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the fact that many topics and issues today (must) also be considered from a security policy perspective is recognised, which is a trend that has become even more pronounced in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine. These issues, which are now also relevant to security policy, include in particular questions of economic security, such as avoiding one-sided dependencies with regard to economic exchange relationships, supply chains, strategic products (e.g. spare parts, basic materials, medical equipment, medicines), and strategic raw materials (e.g. rare earths, copper, lithium). Here, Germany and the EU see the need to diversify relationships and supply chains beyond China—where the most significant dependencies and asymmetries exist—geographically and thematically and to reduce dependencies.<sup>24</sup>

**25**See *ibid.*, 29-33.**26**See *ibid.*, 53-57.**27**

See The Federal Government, "Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany, National Security Strategy," June 2020, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>, 23.

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"Operation Atalanta" is an EU multinational mission that has been running under a UN mandate since 2008 to protect humanitarian aid supplies to Somalia and to combat piracy in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden. The naval operation conducted by the European Union Naval Force-Somalia (EU NAVFOR Somalia) is currently mandated until the end of 2024. See European External Action Service, "EUNAVFOR Atalanta, A maritime security provider driven by the commitment of the contributing nations," 05 June 2023, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-atalanta-maritime-security-provider-driven-commitment-contributing-nations\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-atalanta-maritime-security-provider-driven-commitment-contributing-nations_en).

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"Operation Aspides" is a mission adopted by the EU in February 2024 as part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. It is designed to protect civilian shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden from attacks by Yemen's Houthi militias. The European Union Naval Force-Aspides (EUNAVFOR Aspides) is conducting its operation in close cooperation with the US-led "Operation Prosperity Guardian" and the EU operation "Atalanta." See European External Action Service, "EUNAVFOR OPERATION ASPIDES," 19 February 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-operation-aspides\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-operation-aspides_en).

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CMP=Coordinated Maritime Presence in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, see European External Actions Service, "Maritime Diplomacy: How Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) serves EU interest Globally," 22 July 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/maritime-diplomacy-how-coordinated-maritime-presences-cmp-serves-eu-interest-globally\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/maritime-diplomacy-how-coordinated-maritime-presences-cmp-serves-eu-interest-globally_en), see also *Idem*, "Coordinated Maritime Presences. A tool to enhance coordination of naval and air assets," 21 February 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences\\_en#84720](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en#84720).

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CRIMARIO II = Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean, is an EU initiative for maritime capacity building with and by partners in the region in the areas of education, training, information exchange, communication, etc. See CRIMARIO II, "Mission and Objectives", 2023, <https://www.crimario.eu/mission-and-objectives/>.

The guidelines also emphasise the German government's desire to increase German and European investment in infrastructure and connectivity to improve the fundamental conditions for exchange and enable alternatives to existing dependencies. The same applies to the need for greater cooperation and increased investment in digital and key technologies, which should be supported by different countries and players, both within and outside the region, with complementary skills and resources. Among other things, Germany positions itself as a useful and strong cooperation partner in the field of climate change, both in terms of political and financial commitments and resources<sup>25</sup> and in terms of new markets, technologies and innovations.<sup>26</sup> The document ends with cartographic representations of where and how Germany is already present across the Indo-Pacific region in the aforementioned policy areas.

#### **2.4. Realisation, feasibility, concrete projects**

Unlike France or the UK, Germany has no territories, inhabitants or bases in the Indo-Pacific. Like the majority of EU states, it is a non-territorial power that still has exceptionally close ties to the region. Nevertheless, the Indo-Pacific is a large, relatively distant area for Germany, clearly beyond the first "arc of crisis" (North Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Russia) in its immediate neighbourhood.<sup>27</sup> East Asia—as the economic and political centre of the Indo-Pacific—and even more so Australia and Oceania are particularly distant from this perspective. The situation is different in the Indian Ocean, which represents the maritime connection to the wider region via the Red Sea. Here, Germany and the EU are more directly affected due to their geographical proximity and through humanitarian and military missions (including "Atalanta"<sup>28</sup> and "Aspides"<sup>29</sup>) as well as security policy initiatives (CMP<sup>30</sup>, CRIMARIO II<sup>31</sup>) and have a certain amount of influence and a permanent presence. German and European initiatives and projects, especially if they require a physical presence, are therefore likely to materialise more frequently in the western part of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>32</sup>

Germany's interests in the Indo-Pacific are substantial, and its goals are ambitious. At the same time, the available resources are limited. In view of external and internal challenges, such as the war in Ukraine or the so called "debt brake"—it stipulates that Germany may only take on new debt of up to 0.35% of gross domestic product each year—an appropriate allocation of resources seems unlikely. Prioritisation or cooperation with partners inside and outside the region is recommended in order to avoid adjustments or cuts to the goals. Germany's strengths lie in its role as a major industrialised nation and important trading state, as well as a prominent EU member. Germany must therefore strengthen its industrial and political position by promoting the competitiveness and innovative strength of its economy, helping to shape EU policy in its favour, and improving the overall framework conditions. This requires investment in education, science, research, key technologies and infrastructure, as well as in modern and sustainable energy generation and storage. It is equally important to reduce excessive regulations, inefficient administration and bureaucracy. Germany should also, together with its partners, drive forward infrastructure development and connectivity in the region through concrete projects to follow up on the major announcements made to date with more tangible results.

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See Marianne Peron-Doise, "Debating EU Enhanced Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific: From Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) to Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP)," *The Hague Center for Strategic Studies* (April 2024): 9-11, <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Debating-EU-Enhanced-Naval-Presence-in-the-Indo-Pacific-HCSS-2024.pdf>.

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See The Federal Government, "Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific," 35-39.

**34**

The Federal Government, "Robust. Resilient. Sustainable," 23.

**35**

See The Federal Government, "Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific," 59-61.

**36**

See *ibid.*, 8; 16; 23-25; 35-39.

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For this discourse see among others Jerome Roos, "Why the West should stop talking about the 'rules-based order'," *The New Statesman*, 12 Juni, 2024, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/geopolitics/2024/06/why-the-west-should-stop-talking-about-the-rules-based-order>; see also Oliver Della Costa Stuenkel, "The new world order and the Global South," *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, no. 2 (Summer 2024): 396-404, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grae008>.

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See Krause, *Südliche Demokratien*, 411-417.

As far as security and defence policy is concerned, the clarity with which a (co-)shaping role in security and peace policy in the region is being sought is remarkable.<sup>33</sup> However, Germany is not seeking a substantial military role in the Indo-Pacific. In the National Security Strategy, the Indo-Pacific is mentioned with exactly one sentence: "Globally, the Indo-Pacific also remains of particular importance for Germany and Europe."<sup>34</sup> The focus of the planned security policy commitment is therefore primarily in the areas of conflict prevention, enhancement (E2I), and the development of security and crisis response capacities, including training, participation in exercises, military diplomacy, intensification of security dialogues, arms development and control, non-proliferation, and military and security policy information exchange. In addition, Germany intends to become involved in non-traditional security fields such as cyber defence, combating piracy, drug and human trafficking, as well as humanitarian and disaster relief.

Germany has a strong economic, political, and civil influence, making the planned expansion of educational exchanges with Asian countries such as South Korea, Japan, Singapore, China, and Taiwan promising.<sup>35</sup> These exchanges can help to strengthen civil societies and improve cultural understanding. Any risks and security concerns in the context of this exchange and particularly in relation to China, especially in the area of research, should be analysed and addressed by the federal government and the federal states in order to develop suitable guidelines. The necessary safeguards and restrictions are offset by enormous potential and opportunities that need to be utilised and promoted.

Dealing with China and maintaining a rules-based international order are the most complex and, at the same time, most difficult challenges. In addition to its intensive bilateral relations with Beijing, Germany is primarily endeavouring to find multilateral solutions and approaches to achieve these goals.<sup>36</sup> However, whether a multilateral approach is promising in the Indo-Pacific region, remains an open question. Many countries in the region seem to favour such an approach, but at the same time emphasise their preference for a more orthodox interpretation of principles such as sovereignty or non-interference as the basis of inter-state relations. Multilateral organisations, such as ASEAN, reach their (integrative) limits here, being strongly consensus-oriented and less assertive. In addition, the concept of a rules-based international order is without controversy in the region. Most states in the region are clearly in favour of rules and compliance with international legal standards based on the UN Charter. However, some actors see the concept of a rules-based international order as a synonym for the preservation of the anachronistic dominance of the West and the former colonial powers, the discrimination of non-Western states, and the hegemony of the US and its alliance systems in the region.<sup>37</sup> Any strategy for the region that advocates a rules-based approach and inclusive, effective multilateralism can only have a chance of success, if it is pursued through dialogue and on an equal footing with the states of the region, including on fundamental issues. This incorporates a willingness to support legitimate demands, share power, and make compromises. The preservation of a rules-based international order will not succeed without a fairer and more inclusive order and concessions to the countries of the so-called "Global South".<sup>38</sup> Many of the central and most pressing issues for these countries and their populations are addressed by the guidelines: economic development, infrastructure and energy, climate, pandemics and health, or nutrition.

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The Federal Government, "Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government's Indo-Pacific Guidelines," 10 September 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2481624/0859b3aacfeb8cc6d871066736672c6f/210910-llip-fortschrittsbericht-data.pdf>.

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See *ibid.*, 1; 4-5.

**41**

See *ibid.*, 1; 3.

**42**

The Federal Government, "Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2022," 06 September 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2551720/02b94659532c6af17e40a831bed8fe57/220906-fortschrittsbericht-der-indo-pazifik-leitlinien-data.pdf>.

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See The Federal Government, "Progress report 2022," 1.

**44**

*Ibid.*, 1.

**45**

See *ibid.*, 7-8.

**46**

See *ibid.*, 9-10.

**47**

See Angela Stanzel and Clara Hörning, "Deutscher Balanceakt im Indo-Pazifik: Geostrategische Herausforderungen und Möglichkeiten für die Bundesrepublik," *SWP-Comment*, no. 64 (October 2022): 1.

**48**

The Federal Government, "Progress report 2022," 2.

**49**

The Federal Government, "Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2023," 22 September 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2617992/61051683e7e1521583b3067fb3200ad8/230922-leitlinien-indo-pazifik-3-fortschrittsbericht-data.pdf>.

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See *ibid.*, 1; 3-4.

## Progress reports

The German government's annual progress reports are a yardstick for the implementation of the guidelines and an important tool for understanding the development of German policy in and for the region. In addition to important individual results, progress in the respective thematic areas is discussed. As the first report in 2021<sup>39</sup> noted, EU relations with ASEAN were upgraded to the level of a "Strategic Partnership" under the German EU Council Presidency in December 2020. For the first time, Germany took part in an ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) at ministerial level, and the development of a joint EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific was initiated together with France and the Netherlands, which was then adopted in 2021. Of the numerous individual measures, the training and deployment of the German frigate "Bayern"<sup>40</sup> in the Indo-Pacific and the German accession to the "International Solar Alliance"<sup>41</sup>, an Indo-French initiative in the field of renewable energies, stand out.

The report<sup>42</sup> published a year later was already influenced by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The challenges to the international order, the United Nations Charter, and international law were strongly emphasised. In the Indo-Pacific, too, the rules of the international order are increasingly being challenged by individual actors.<sup>43</sup> In this context, the intensification of tensions in the region was addressed and—in contrast to the guidelines—warned of the danger of escalation in the Taiwan Strait. A change in the status quo (Taiwan) should only take place through "peaceful means and by mutual agreement".<sup>44</sup> In relation to Germany's contributions to maintaining the rules-based order, the deployment of the frigate "Bayern" was again mentioned, reference was made to further exercises by Bundeswehr units, and an expansion of defence cooperation was announced.<sup>45</sup> Germany's commitment to human rights and the rule of law was also clearly emphasised. With regard to economic and trade policy issues, the enforcement of rules, fairness, and sustainability were emphasised, and the negotiation of further bilateral free trade agreements was discussed.<sup>46</sup> Overall, the report took a much more geostrategic position, but continued to emphasise its inclusive understanding and rejection of the formation of blocs in the Indo-Pacific. The report states explicitly that "Germany is unambiguously opposed to the formation of blocs in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>47</sup> The policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific contain offers of cooperation to all partners in the region that are committed to the principles of the rules-based order."<sup>48</sup>

For 2023<sup>49</sup>, the significant expansion of diplomatic visits and, in particular, relations with the Pacific island states was noted. The opening of the German embassy in Suva (Fiji) in August 2023 was the most visible highlight. In addition to a strong commitment to multilateralism, climate change was a key focus of German activities. Among other things, bilateral and multilateral initiatives to reduce greenhouse gases, expand renewable energy, and support reforestation projects were mentioned. Furthermore, financial support and various smaller collaborations were agreed upon with individual countries in the region and ASEAN.<sup>50</sup> In the area of security policy, Germany's commitment was demonstrated by the renewed participation of German Armed Forces units in various multinational exercises in Australia as well as bilateral cooperation with Singapore, Japan and South Korea. In addition, the Indo-Pacific was classified as an official partner region of the German Enhancement Initiative (E2I) and German-Japanese relations were

**51**See *ibid.*, 5.**52**

The Government of the Republic of Korea, "Strategy for a Free and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region," December 2022.

**53**See Eric J. Ballbach, "South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy: Opportunities and challenges for cooperation with the EU," *SWP Research Paper*, no. 2 (March 2023); see also Andrew Yeo, "South Korean Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Era," *Brookings Policy Brief* (November 2022), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FP\\_20230117\\_rok\\_indo\\_pacific\\_yeo.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FP_20230117_rok_indo_pacific_yeo.pdf).**54**See Eric J. Ballbach, "Deutschland und Südkorea auf dem Weg zur strategischen Partnerschaft: Perspektiven der bilateralen Beziehungen," *SWP Comment*, no. 61 (December 2023), 5.**55**See The Office of National Security, "The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy: Global Pivotal State for Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity," 08 June, 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_25772/view.do?seq=16&page=1](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_25772/view.do?seq=16&page=1).**56**

See Ballbach, "South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy," 15.

expanded at the level of foreign and defence ministers<sup>51</sup>. Overall, it can be said that the topics and activities are aligned towards the interests and objectives of the guidelines. Regardless of whether events are also subsumed under the objectives of the guidelines arising spontaneously and less from strategic motivation, coherence and continuity of German and European activities can be observed, which is certainly also due to the guidelines and the regular progress reports.

### 3. The Korean Approach

#### 3.1. Origin, character, background of the document

Under the government of President Yoon Suk-yeol, in office since May 2023, South Korea presented its own policy document on the Indo-Pacific for the first time on 28 December 2023. The 43-page-long paper titled "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region" (SFPPIP)<sup>52</sup> marks a recognisable change in South Korea's foreign policy orientation with regard to the region and its relations with key players such as the US and China. With this document, Seoul officially adapted the concept of the Indo-Pacific for the first time. The late reference to the "Indo-Pacific" in comparison to other nations is partly due to South Korea's complex geopolitical situation in the area of tension between the US and China, the two dominant external forces important for the future of the Korean Peninsula. The significance of the US as South Korea's most important defence policy partner and security guarantor has grown even further as a result of North Korea's nuclear armament. China's position as the largest economic partner is equally important due to its global position, geographical proximity, and long-standing bilateral relations.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, due to its political system and history, South Korea is predominantly divided socially and politically into two camps, which hold clearly distinguishable positions, particularly in terms of foreign policy, and which can lead to significant shifts in direction in the event of changes of government.<sup>54</sup> The extent to which foreign policy is affected by this can be seen in the name of South Korea's current National Security Strategy, among other things. This is not called the Security Strategy of the Republic of Korea, as in other countries, but is explicitly linked to the name of the current administration: "The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy." It is also a document of the Office of National Security, which is headed by the National Security Advisor and reports directly to the President.<sup>55</sup> A working group was set up in the State Department to prepare and draft the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Interestingly, this was located in the Office of North American Affairs, which can already be seen as a sign of coordination and closer alignment with the US.<sup>56</sup>

In a nutshell, the progressive camp is more in favour of détente, confidence-building, and dialogue—especially in relation to North Korea—and does not see the expansion of the military alliance with the US and closer cooperation with Japan as a priority. It sees China and Russia as necessary strategic partners, especially in the region and with a view to peaceful coexistence in North-East Asia, as well as a pacification or resolution of the conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The conservative camp often takes a more confrontational stance towards the North,

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See Andrew Yeo, "South Korea as a global pivotal state," *Brookings Institution*, December 19, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/south-korea-as-a-global-pivotal-state/>; see also Elisabeth I-Mi Suh, "Die Nordkoreapolitik Moon Jae-ins und seine Bemühungen um Vermittlung—Fürsprecher Pjôngjangs und doch abhängig von Washington?" In *Der Nordkorea-Konflikt: Interessenlagen, Konfliktdimensionen, Lösungswege*, ed. Michael Staack (Opladen/Berlin/Toronto: Budrich, 2020), 68-70.

**58**

See *ibid.*

**59**

See Ballbach, "South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy," 8-11.

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See *ibid.*, 17; 30.

**61**

Republic of Korea, "Strategy for a Free and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region," 4.

**62**

See *ibid.*, 5-7.

**63**

See *ibid.*, 19-20.

**64**

See Yoon Suk-yeol, "South Korea Needs to Step Up," *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.

emphasising deterrence and military strength as well as the expansion of military and political cooperation with the US and, if politically possible, with Japan. It also emphasises the importance of human rights, freedom, and democracy, especially under the new Yoon government. China and Russia are defined as starting points for security and defence policy threats to South Korea and the region.<sup>57</sup> This is aggravated by the strong presidential system, its simultaneous limitation to a five-year term of office, and the relative majority voting system with the simultaneous primacy of the executive in foreign, security, and defence policy.<sup>58</sup> In view of this strategic starting position, the previous government, under Moon Jae-in (2017-2022), took a cautious approach to South Korea's foreign policy with the "New Southern Policy" (NSP). The NSP aimed to maintain the complicated balance with the US and China, while attempting to diversify its own economic and political relations and options, thereby allowing South Korea a greater degree of freedom of action in foreign policy. This included, among other things, strengthening relations with the ASEAN states and India.<sup>59</sup> In the last phase of the Moon administration, a stronger alignment with US ideas on the Indo-Pacific was already evident. The emerging paradigm shift was certainly recognised, and political answers were sought, but these remained vague and did not adopt the concept and terminology of the US strategy.<sup>60</sup>

### 3.2. *Aspiration and functions of the guidelines*

Right at the beginning the paper states a clear commitment to the region and the concept of the Indo-Pacific: "The Republic of Korea is an Indo-Pacific nation. Our national interests are directly tied to the stability and prosperity in the region".<sup>61</sup> The strategic importance of the region cannot be emphasised enough. More than three quarters of exports go to or are imported from countries in the region, and more than two thirds of direct investments from South Korea are made here. It is emphasised that the shift towards the Indo-Pacific is a direct result of the Yoon administration coming to power. The steadily increasing geopolitical tensions, the arms races, in particular North Korea's nuclear armament in connection with the expansion of missile technology and the decline in cooperative formats are worrying. South Korea stands for peace, a rules-based order, democracy, freedom, the rule of law and human rights. Cooperation with like-minded states and South Korea's concept of becoming a "Global Pivotal State" are guiding principles. These terms, which are already prominently mentioned here, also run through the rest of the document.<sup>62</sup>

The paper thus clearly expresses sympathy for the US's ideas for the region while distancing itself from the other domestic political camp. Only when the Yoon government took office and the new strategy was implemented, a visible shift in emphasis towards the US and its Indo-Pacific concept began to emerge. However, as the strategic dilemmas for South Korea remained in principle, the South Korean strategy continues to be an expression of necessary compromises, especially vis-à-vis China.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless—and this becomes clear with the SFPPIP—the Yoon administration sees the alliance with the US as the most important point of reference for South Korean foreign policy. On the other hand, it sees currently no room for manoeuvre or development options on the Korean Peninsula itself and therefore the need to devote more attention to the region and global interests in terms of foreign policy.<sup>64</sup> Central to this is the concept of the Global Pivotal

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See The Office of National Security, "The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy"; see also Andrew Yeo, "South Korea as a global pivotal state".

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Republic of Korea, "Strategy for a Free and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region," 8-11.

State, which was introduced in the National Security Strategy and is linked to the region here. In addition to the stronger alignment with the US, Japan, and other like-minded partners, also outside the region, e.g. with the European Union, the concept primarily envisages a stronger focus beyond the Korean Peninsula. This is linked to an overall stronger commitment in international institutions, but above all in multilateral security and economic forums, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) or with ASEAN, typical strategies of a middle power.<sup>65</sup> In terms of their function as strategic and diplomatic communication, the SFPPIPs are a compromise paper overall, especially with regard to the complicated balancing act vis-à-vis the US and China. In the context of the NSS, the messages, differences and the change in the intended foreign policy orientation nevertheless become clear.

### 3.3. Keypoints

The strategy comprises 43 pages, which appear pleasantly short due to the format and some graphics. It is also very clearly organised into four main chapters: Background, Vision, Core Concerns, and Conclusions. The core statements of the four-page first chapter (background and strategic significance) were discussed in the previous section. The next thirteen pages deal with the South Korean vision for the region, the principles of cooperation, and the regional dimension. It explains what is being sought for the Indo-Pacific under the three core issues of freedom, peace, and prosperity, and what these mean in South Korea's understanding.

Values and principles such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and a rules-based order, which position South Korea closely alongside the US and like-minded partners, are once again emphasised. Unilateral changes to the status quo are rejected, which can be seen as a hint to China and North Korea, as well as Russia globally. The avoidance of armed conflicts, the peaceful resolution of conflicts through dialogue, and comprehensive cooperation in traditional and non-traditional security issues are emphasized as necessary. The preferred forum is the United Nations, and the basis is international law. The most prominent security issues in the region, according to the SFPPIP, include the issue of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, non-proliferation, counterterrorism, maritime security, cyber security, and healthcare. Prosperity can only be achieved on the basis of a stable environment and a fair economic order. This also includes the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the reduction of inequality between states and societies, as well as climate protection and the limitation of health risks. Innovation, competitiveness, and the promotion of future industries and technologies are just as important as stable and resilient trade and supply chains. Security issues must be taken into account, but must not dominate economic interests.<sup>66</sup>

The principles for cooperation, which are generally offered to all states, are: Inclusivity, trust, and reciprocity. Only on the basis of trust and mutual benefit can stable and effective partnerships be built in order to realise the vision. The geographical scope of the strategy covers the broadest possible definition of the region and is described with the sub-regions of the North Pacific, Southeast Asia and ASEAN, South Asia, Oceania and the African coast of the Indian Ocean. Following on from the concept of the Global Pivotal State, the EU, and here the European states of France, Germany and the UK in particular, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean states, are also mentioned as important for the Indo-

**67**See *ibid.*, 13-21.**68***Ibid.*, 14.**69**See *ibid.*, 22-28.**70**

See *ibid.*, 28-37; see also Patrick Köllner, Johannes Plagemann and Christian Wirth, "Towards Closer European Union and German Cooperation with South Korea in the Indo-Pacific," *GIGA Focus Asia*, no. 5 (November 2022): 5, doi: <https://doi.org/10.57671/gfas-22052>.

Pacific region. Interesting in this context is the explicit mention of NATO and the Korean representation at NATO in Brussels.<sup>67</sup> Japan and China are mentioned in a joint paragraph, with Japan being seen as the closest neighbour that shares the values and the most important like-minded partner after the US. China is described as a "key partner in achieving prosperity and peace in the region."<sup>68</sup>

The strategy identifies a total of nine core interests, which are linked to various initiatives and cooperation formats, for implementation and as focal points of commitment. The nine core lines of endeavour are as follows:

- Build Regional Order Based on Norms and Rules
- Cooperate to Promote Rule of Law and Human Rights
- Strengthen Non-Proliferation and Counter-Terrorism Efforts Across the Region
- Expand Comprehensive Security Cooperation
- Build Economic Security Networks
- Strengthen Cooperation in Critical Domains of Science and Technology and Close Digital Gap
- Lead Regional Cooperation on Climate Change and Energy Security
- Engage in "Contributive Diplomacy" through Tailored Development Cooperation Partnerships
- Promote Mutual Understanding and Exchanges

Prioritisation is not undertaken. However, the points "Expand Comprehensive Security Cooperation" and "Lead Regional Cooperation on Climate Change and Energy Security" are discussed in more detail. Once again, reference is made to the importance of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, and the commitment to a rules-based order with like-minded partners is prioritised. The US and Japan, the United Nations, and co-operation with NATO are mentioned explicitly. Russia's war against Ukraine is cited as a clear violation of the UN Charter and a threat to security in the Indo-Pacific. North Korea is predominantly mentioned in the context of non-proliferation, the maintenance of sanctions and defence against terrorism. In this context, the trilateral alliance between the US, South Korea, and Japan is accorded central importance.<sup>69</sup> Cooperation with ASEAN and its cooperation formats are strongly emphasised for comprehensive security in traditional and, above all, non-traditional and civilian security fields. In addition, cooperation with NATO is mentioned again, which is to be expanded, as is cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

The focus on the US and like-minded partners, already visible in the security sector, is also being continued in the economic sector with the clear commitment as a founding member of the IPEF. However, it is diversified and relativised by the aforementioned active participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the renewed emphasis on the outstanding regional importance of ASEAN and its various forums and formats for economic, trade, financial, and health issues, as well as for joint measures against climate change. Finally, the global importance of East Asia and its three most important countries, China, South Korea and Japan, is also emphasised under the heading of climate and energy issues. An expansion of cooperation in this area and the fundamental resumption of trilateral summits is proposed.<sup>70</sup> In the conclusions, which are barely more than one-page long, reference is made above all to the Korean vision for the Indo-Pacific and the concept of the Global Pivotal State. The implementation of the strategy is now being tackled, with renewed emphasis on ROK-ASEAN cooperation.

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See Ballbach, "South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy," 17-18.

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Jagannath Panda, Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Richard Ghiasy, "South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Ray of Hope or Losing Steam?," *Institute for Security & Development Policy*, August, 2024, <https://www.isdp.eu/publication/south-koreas-indo-pacific-strategy-a-ray-of-hope-or-losing-steam/>.

**3.4. Realisation, feasibility, concrete projects**

For many years, South Korea pursued a foreign policy that simultaneously sought an alliance with the US and a strategic partnership with China. This policy of strategic ambiguity was successful as long as relations between the US and China were reasonably good. However, the growing rivalry between Washington and Beijing in an intensifying geopolitical environment has called this policy into question. Already under the Moon Jae-in administration, South Korea began to move closer to the US, especially after President Biden took office in 2021. A major concern of the new administration under President Yoon Suk-yeol was to end the strategic ambiguity and to put the alliance between the Republic of Korea and the US at the centre of South Korea's foreign policy. South Korea's accession to the US-led IPEF and the semiconductor alliance "Chip 4"—despite strong warnings from Beijing—are clear evidence of this.<sup>71</sup>

However, there are foreign and domestic political limits to the realisation of these plans. China remains South Korea's most important bilateral partner, particularly in areas such as trade, strategic raw materials, climate change and energy, tourism, and public health. Due to the enormous dependencies, the strong interests of its own economy and the significant drop in approval ratings within the population, it would simply be unrealistic and unsustainable for the Yoon administration to refuse to cooperate with China. At the same time, however, the worsening geopolitical tensions, and the "strong and developing Northeast Asian security challenges"<sup>72</sup>, make it essential to reduce overdependencies, diversify trade relations and supply chains, as well as strengthen economic resilience. The question of how to deal with China remains an enormously important, complex, and difficult domestic and foreign policy issue, especially for the Republic of Korea. Overall, it is clear that South Korea's strategic dilemmas—particularly from an economic and security policy perspective—remain. This is certainly one of the reasons why the SFPPIP largely adheres to the Moon administration's principle of ASEAN centrality and makes it clear that ASEAN and its member states are Seoul's most important partners in the implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Republic of Korea and ASEAN share many views on the need to diversify foreign and trade relations, promote multilateralism, and maintain a rules-based order. The stated intention of ending strategic ambiguity in foreign policy and the future clear focus on relations with the US and Japan are relativised by this. The geopolitical reality, the nature, the necessities, and the complexity of bilateral relations with the People's Republic of China also set clear limits to the harmonisation of Seoul's China policy with that of Washington. Nevertheless, there are clear steps towards the US and strategic clarity that cannot be overlooked: the accessions to IPEF and Chip 4, the expansion of the defence policy alliance with the US and Japan, as well as the relations with QUAD and NATO. At the same time, attempts are being made to make these changes in direction acceptable and balanced for the People's Republic by making concessions to Beijing, such as the proposed resumption of trilateral meetings with Japan or active participation in RCEP.

The successful implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy will depend on South Korea's ability to implement a coherent strategy that serves both national interests and favours the expansion or establishment of partnerships. Due to its own complex foreign policy situation, the limited resources of a middle power and the Sino-US rivalry that is having a greater regional impact, South Korea is not only endeavouring to play a more active and strategic role in the Indo-Pacific, but

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Ibid.

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See Kuyoun Chung, "South Korea's Quest to Become a Global Pivotal State," *The Diplomat*, November 04, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/south-koreas-quest-to-become-a-global-pivotal-state/>.

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See Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, "9th Trilateral Summit in Seoul, ROK," 27 May, 2024, [https://tcs-asia.org/en/board/news\\_view.php?id=5348&pNo=1&code=news](https://tcs-asia.org/en/board/news_view.php?id=5348&pNo=1&code=news); see also Reuters, "South Korea, China, Japan joint declaration after first summit in four years," 27 May, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-china-japan-joint-declaration-after-first-summit-four-years-2024-05-27/>.

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See *The Japan Times*, "Japan, China and South Korea arranging summit for May 26-27," 05 May, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/05/05/japan/japan-china-south-korea-summit/>.

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See Köllner, Plagemann and Wirth, "Towards Closer Cooperation with South Korea," 7-8; see also *Aljazeera*, "China urges South Korea, Japan to uphold free trade at three-way summit," 27 May, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2024/5/27/china-urges-south-korea-to-uphold-free-trade-at-three-way-summit>.

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The Government of the Republic of Korea, "The Action Plan for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific," December 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m\\_26382/contents.do](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_26382/contents.do).

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs–Republic of Korea, "Action Plan for Indo-Pacific Strategy of Republic of Korea Unveiled, Marking First Anniversary of Strategy," Press Releases, 21 December, 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=322395](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322395).

also to make its foreign policy more active, differentiated, and global. Over the past two years, the Yoon government has constantly endeavoured to maintain or consolidate South Korea's regional and global role and the rules-based regional and international order through partnerships with like-minded countries. This has included various initiatives and formats, particularly with the US, Japan, Australia, India, ASEAN partners, the EU and the Pacific island states. This has only been partially successful due to the permanent preoccupation with the threat from North Korea.<sup>73</sup> From Seoul's perspective, trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan, which goes far beyond pure security and defence policy, was of particular importance, especially in relation to North Korea, China, and Russia. In the joint declaration of the Camp David summit in August 2023, South Korea supported the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Straits issue and the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on disputes in the South China Sea, which clearly reaffirmed its chosen strategy and positioning alongside the US.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, Seoul is also trying to maintain dialogue with Beijing. Almost two years after the announcement in the SFPPIP and five years after the last such meeting, the Yoon government has at least succeeded in arranging another trilateral summit between China, South Korea, and Japan. In the 25th year since the start of the trilateral dialogue and for the first time in almost five years, Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol met for talks in Seoul on 27 May 2024. Even if there was little new in the joint declaration and the different assessments tended to highlight the different points of view, the resumption of this format can be seen as a success in these times of geopolitical unrest. In addition, all three partners have agreed to organise regular summits and ministerial meetings again.<sup>75</sup> Despite differences of opinion, the Yoon government hopes to revitalise relations with China and work towards a positive role for the People's Republic in matters relating to North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programme.<sup>76</sup> However, it remains questionable how this can be achieved and at what cost, while at the same time positioning itself more strongly alongside the US and Japan. In addition, unresolved historical issues and disputes continue to place limits on Korean-Japanese relations and Seoul's interests only partially overlap with those of Tokyo.<sup>77</sup> South Korea's complex foreign policy and regional position remain, as do many of the associated dilemmas.

## Action plan and progress reports

On 19 December 2023, and on the occasion of the upcoming anniversary of the publication of the SFPPIP, South Korea published an action plan for the implementation of its strategy.<sup>78</sup> In the announcement, the South Korean government linked its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region with the vision of a "globally pivotal state". The action plan is described as a foreign policy roadmap, which was also developed in dialogue with important partners such as ASEAN and the Pacific Island states<sup>79</sup>. In the action plan, planned or intended diplomatic initiatives, meetings, and actions with specifically named states, governmental and non-governmental organisations, institutions, and other social actors are assigned to the nine core lines of effort from the Indo-Pacific Strategy on over 30 pages. The

[80](#)

See The Government of the Republic of Korea, "Action Plan".

[81](#)

The Government of the Republic of Korea, "2023 Progress Report of the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy," December 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m\\_26382/contents.do](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_26382/contents.do).

[82](#)

See *Ibid.*, 5-7.

[83](#)

See *Ibid.*, 8-17.

[84](#)

See, *Ibid.*, 17-21.

[85](#)

See, *Ibid.*, 21-25.

results of the diplomatic and foreign policy endeavours are to be reported in the annual progress reports that have also been announced.<sup>80</sup>

The first of these reports<sup>81</sup> was presented shortly afterwards, in December 2023. It is also based on the nine core lines of effort of the SFPIIP and then names and evaluates the relevant developments during the period under review. Before that, however, the key events of the year from Seoul's perspective are highlighted under the heading "Key Developments". These include the participation in the "Summit for Democracy" and the NATO summit in Lithuania. It also emphasises the expansion of trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan and the summit between the three countries at Camp David. The summit between South Korea and the ASEAN states, whose relationship is to be expanded into a comprehensive strategic partnership, is mentioned immediately afterwards. Finally, the ROK-Pacific Islands Summit is prominently mentioned before the vision of South Korea as a "globally pivotal state" is renewed and linked to a continuous and substantial increase in development aid.<sup>82</sup> Other initiatives include endeavours to improve bilateral relations between the US and South Korea and South Korea's election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. The aforementioned strengthening of the trilateral alliance with the US and Japan, the deepening of relations with ASEAN, and the establishment of new partnerships with the Pacific Island states were also driven forward. By promoting various multilateral cooperation formats and participating in numerous exercises and coordination meetings in areas such as maritime security, technology, and climate change, South Korea has actively sought to strengthen comprehensive security in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>83</sup>

Strengthening economic security by expanding regional and supra-regional networks and increasing the resilience of supply chains, particularly for critical and new technologies, was the focus of further activities, which also included the expansion of cooperation with partners such as Vietnam, Mongolia, the US, and Canada in the areas of renewable energy and critical minerals. This is just as crucial for the country's own science and technology-based industry, including in areas such as automobiles, aerospace, computing, infrastructure, battery technology, and digital communication, as investments in and cooperation on the expansion of digital and physical infrastructure in the region.<sup>84</sup> South Korea also joined the Climate Club during the G7 summit in the reporting period and has intensified and expanded its commitment to global decarbonisation efforts and the stabilisation of the energy market in the Indo-Pacific in every respect. This also applies to the area of nuclear power generation, the safety of which is to be ensured and strengthened together with ASEAN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Finally, South Korea has expanded its commitment to development cooperation, including a significant increase in the ODA (Official Development Assistance) quota and strategic cooperation with major donor countries and organisations.<sup>85</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: Similarities, differences, way forward

There are numerous similarities between the Indo-Pacific strategies of Germany and South Korea. Firstly, both have a very similar understanding of the geographical boundaries of the region and a comparable inclusive understanding. This results from similar political, socio-economic, and social starting conditions:

86

See Köllner, Plagemann and Wirth, "Towards Closer Cooperation with South Korea," 4-5; see also Staack, "Die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland".

Both are typical middle powers, democracies with vibrant civil societies and transnational actors, and also globally networked industrial and economic nations. Secondly, the relationship between South Korea and Germany vis-à-vis the two rival superpowers, the US and China, is similar. For both, the US is an important, if not the most important security guarantor, and China is the largest and an indispensable trading partner. Both factors are even more pronounced in the Korean case. Due to their status as industrial and trading nations and middle powers, both Germany and Korea are interested in and dependent on a rules-based international order, functioning international organisations and effective, inclusive multilateralism.<sup>86</sup> This subsequently characterises their strategies, which have adopted the concept of the Indo-Pacific but want to see it shaped in a more inclusive and cooperative way. Dealing with China, defusing the Sino-US great power rivalry and the uncertainties of US foreign policy pose the greatest challenges for Berlin and Seoul. Any kind of containment of China and a decoupling of trade and economic relations are not in their interests and, in their judgement, will lead to a loss of national and global prosperity. They therefore reject the creation of antagonistic camps (bifurcation, binarity, technological separation, and islands around the US and China) and economic protectionism, even if this will not be easy in the wake of growing protectionist tendencies, particularly in the US. South Korea and Germany see the need for fundamental diversification, economic security, and increased resilience due to the intensifying geopolitisation. Together with like-minded partners, and the many countries of the 'Global South' that do not want to be assigned to either of the two camps (US/China), they have a better chance to succeed in striving to maintain free trade and globalisation as well as continued exchange and dialogue.

Alongside other important individual states in the region, such as Japan, India, Australia, and New Zealand, both countries regard the ASEAN organisation and its members—whose pivotal role to their regional strategies they have repeatedly emphasised and with whom they want to expand and deepen existing relations—as a central partner and as a model and anchor for regulatory policy. In addition to ASEAN as the primary partner states for effective multilateralism and a rules-based order, Berlin and Seoul are pushing for the expansion of their relations with the Pacific Island states, but also with other regional organisations such as BIMSTEC and IORA. The planned investments in climate protection, clean energy generation, digital and physical connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region are seen as part of the global responsibility of both nations from a geopolitical, climate and development policy perspective. In both strategies, the expansion of existing relationships, agreements, and cooperation is open to all interested states, whereby both particularly want to strengthen cooperation with like-minded partners (ROK) or so-called "value partners" (Germany). These approaches and principles are likely to be welcomed by many states in the region if they are implemented quickly and fairly and are based on mutual benefit.

On the one hand, the potential (cooperation, free trade agreements, climate, technology, and raw materials partnerships, etc.) of both strategies and countries is considerable. On the other hand, both sides are making a belated start in their turn towards the region, sometimes with political and normative conditions, considerable regulatory requirements, and security thinking (Germany/EU). More pragmatism, less hesitation, impromptu recognition and response to the interests of regional partners, a balance, and faster agreements and implementation are urgently needed to exploit the previously untapped major opportunities and possibilities beyond existing partnerships. The expansion of smaller partnerships

**87**

See Hanns Günther Hilpert, "Gegen den Strich: Indo-Pazifik," *Internationale Politik*, 03 January, 2022, <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/gegen-den-strich-indo-pazifik>; see also Nicole Bastian and Mathias Peer, "Indonesien holt Wertschöpfung zurück und streitet mit Europa—Interview mit dem indonesischen Wirtschaftsminister Airlangga Hartarto," *Handelsblatt*, 13 May, 2024, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/airlangga-hartarto-indonesien-holt-wertschoepfung-zurueck-und-streitet-mit-europa/100037201.html>.

**88**

Staack, "The Foreign Policy of the Federal Republic of Germany", 201-206.

**89**

See Michael Staack, "Kann der neue Entspannungsprozess auf der koreanischen Halbinsel erfolgreich sein?" In *Der Nordkorea-Konflikt: Interessenlagen, Konfliktdimensionen, Lösungswege*, ed. Idem (Opladen/Berlin/Toronto: Budrich, 2020), 8-10; see also Marco Overhaus and Alexandra Sakaki, "Die US-Bündnisse mit Japan und Südkorea: Stärken und Bruchlinien in der sicherheitspolitischen Kooperation," *SWP Research Paper*, no. 5 (May 2021).

**90**

See I-Mi Suh, "Die Nordkoreapolitik Moon Jae-in," 68-70; see also Ballbach, "Deutschland und Südkorea," 5.

with regional leading powers, such as Indonesia, could also greatly add to actual possibilities and potential.<sup>87</sup>

One of the differences between the two countries is their geographical and (geo)political location. Unlike South Korea, Germany is not a country bordering the Indo-Pacific. It has regained its unity and full sovereignty since 1990. With the expansion of the EU and NATO, it is no longer a "frontline state" but is surrounded by partners. Its integration into the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance has significantly improved its security situation, and Germany can build on the solidarity of its partners. At the same time, it has intertwined parts of its foreign policy sovereignty and its interests with those of the other member states. In some cases—for example, in the EU's foreign trade policy—these are even 'communitised' in the EU.<sup>88</sup> Germany's multiple involvement in the EU's foreign policy can lead to a leverage effect for German policy approaches and greater German/European influence (EU's trade and regulatory power). However, it can also curb or thwart German ambitions in the event of conflicting interests within the EU or if the Union fails to act.

South Korea, on the other hand, remains in a complex geographical and foreign policy situation. The continuing division of the Korean Peninsula has inter-Korean, regional, and international implications that strongly influence the Republic of Korea's foreign policy and limit its room for manoeuvre. There is still only an armistice, not a peace treaty between the two Koreas. Moreover, the treaty was only signed between the US—representing the UN Command—China, and North Korea. The US is not only present with strong troop contingents on the border, but the South Korean units would also be operationally subordinate to the US command in the event of war. The US also guarantees South Korea's nuclear protection against North Korea, which has now become a nuclear power, through its extended nuclear deterrent. The conflict is additionally overshadowed and complicated by the hegemonic conflict between the US and China for supremacy in the region.<sup>89</sup> While in Germany, despite the recent complications in forming a government, there is continuity in foreign policy between successive governments, in South Korea we are dealing with two political camps whose foreign policies differ significantly. This and the limitation of the politically decisive presidency to a five-year term have repeatedly led to disruptions and a lack of continuity in foreign policy.<sup>90</sup>

In the Indo-Pacific strategies, the differences are less obvious, but they do exist. For example, the German guidelines are formulated more cautiously with regard to the promotion of universal values than is emphasised under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration. Germany's strategy focuses more on maintaining a rules-based order and strengthening multilateral cooperation. There is also a greater reluctance to lean too closely on US-led strategies to contain China, which implies a differentiated positioning in the regional power game. South Korea emphasises the importance of comprehensive security cooperation with regard to traditional and non-traditional security challenges more strongly than Germany. The focus on economic security, strengthening trade and investment networks, and leadership in technological innovation is also clearer in the SFPPIP, while the German guidelines focus on securing trade routes, promoting a rules-based order and multilateralism, the rules of free trade, and participation in multilateral formats to stabilise the region. In the progress reports, Germany has also emphasised the increasing link between economic and security policy interests.

[91](#)

See Panda/Chen/Ghiasi, "South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy."

[92](#)

See Ballbach, "Germany and South Korea," 5-6.

## Germany and South Korea on the way to a strategic partnership?

The perception of the EU as a player in the Indo-Pacific region is growing. At the same time, there is still considerable development potential. This applies in particular to relations with Germany. In certain policy areas, such as defence or semiconductors and new technologies, South Korea's relations with other European partner states, such as Poland and the Netherlands, are already more intensive.<sup>91</sup> Germany and South Korea are linked by historical events, similar values and interests, as well as stable economic and over 140 years of diplomatic relations. With the increasing geopoliticisation of international politics and its recently formulated foreign policy and strategic ideas, relations could also expand to include security policy and strategic issues. Especially as South Korea has expanded its relations with NATO and its role as an arms exporter, e.g. to Poland. Germany's "Zeitenwende" and South Korea's vision of a "Global Pivotal State" proclaim more international responsibility on the part of democratic middle powers and are compatible with each other. Recently, reciprocal visits and dialogue formats have intensified, become more permanent and, in principle, have been extended to all policy areas. Both countries are dependent on partners for the implementation of their strategies and fulfil the respective requirements for such partnerships to a high degree. The two economies are particularly well suited to each other in future technologies such as semiconductor and battery production, renewable energies, and digital and physical connectivity. But in terms of economic vulnerability and the desired reduction of dependencies, securitisation of supply chains, and access to critical resources, both countries are dependent on each other.

As established middle powers, they should jointly seek partnerships, cooperation, and dialogue formats not only with the superpowers China and the US, but also and especially with other partners in the region, such as ASEAN, other middle powers, or the Pacific Island states. South Korea and Germany share with these countries an inclusive approach to the region and the awareness of suffering political, economic, and social losses under an intensifying great power rivalry. This group of states would also share a rejection of zero-sum logic, a desire for rules and compliance with them, as well as a desire to diversify relations, particularly with China, and to hedge against different geopolitical and security policy developments and trends. The considerable commitment of both countries in the area of development and economic assistance as well as comprehensive cooperation in non-traditional security fields, such as health, climate, maritime security and trade routes, fisheries, and the fight against organised crime and terrorism, would offer points of contact here, as would the regulatory and normative ideas, on which a dialogue should be conducted and to which concessions and support should be signalled. Through coordination and cooperation, Seoul and Berlin could achieve synergies and mutual reinforcement of the intended measures and initiatives. An upgrading of bilateral relations to stabilise them and safeguard them against any changes, of course, in the more volatile South Korean political culture, would be an important step in that direction.<sup>92</sup>

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