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Rejuvenating Indo-German Relations

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The burgeoning ties of India with the US and France have evoked much interest in the defence sector. But another fledgling tie that has not received its due is India's defence relations with Germany.

Since the visit of German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius to India in June 2023, a great deal has transpired between the two countries that signals that a strong foundation can be built for future ties. Pistorius visited the Western Naval Command and Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited during his visit to India.

Germany's manoeuvring to align with India is driven by strategic interests, as enumerated by Defence Minister Pistorius, who stated that Russian weapons for India are not in Germany's interests. The country has traversed a huge arc from refusing to supply MTU engines for India's Light Tank Zorawar to constructing the latest state-of-the-art 214 submarine equipped with fuel-cell-based Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) and Lithium-Ion Battery.¹

The German shipbuilder ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems, which supplies 70 per cent of non-nuclear submarines globally, has joined hands with the Indian Mazagon Docks Ltd (MDL) and submitted a bid for Project 75 'I' (India) to build six conventional submarines with its latest AIP technology. So far, Germany is the only country that has successfully operationalised a Fuel-Cell-based AIP system on board submarines, inducted by Israel and Turkey. The South Korean AIP system has also been developed from the German one.

The fuel-based AIP system, along with the Lithium-Ion battery, gives submarines the capability to lurk in the ocean depths for a longer duration and, when required, to increase their pace to reach the target without compromising on stealth. From the first submarine onwards, the boats will be built at MDL. This will allow India to design and construct 24 conventional subsurface vessels as part of a 30-year submarine-building programme.

Defence Trade between the Two Countries

German Ambassador to India Philip Ackermann has spoken about Berlin overcoming its reticence and engaging more actively with India. There has been a marked increase in military exchanges, exercises, and exploring the avenue of joint production in line with India's quest for self-reliance through 'Make in India'.² Apart from making the right noises, the German government has been putting its money where its mouth is.

Contrary to its initial reluctance to be part of Project 75'1' when the tender was floated three years ago, in March 2024, the German Navy provided its submarine for the Indian Navy to evaluate it in the field. The Indian Navy team went on a day-long diving trial in an operational 212-class German Navy submarine to evaluate the AIP technology.³ Germany is not averse to a Government-to-Government deal for the project. The ball is now in India's court.

German Deputy Foreign Minister Tobias Lindner has asserted that Germany is working on easing arms exports to India. Germany has been looking favourably at applications from German firms to sell small arms to India.⁴ Following his assurance, Germany granted India a license to purchase small arms from German companies, marking a major departure from its earlier stand.

Berlin has embargoed the sale of small arms to third countries other than European Union member states, NATO countries, and NATO equivalent countries (Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Switzerland). Hence, the permission to sell small arms to India signals the importance Germany attaches to its ties with India.⁵

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, during his meeting with his German counterpart in 2023, had flagged the possibility of German defence investments in two Defence Industrial Corridors set up by the Indian government in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. The aim is to broaden India's defence industrial base while at the same time becoming a part of German defence firms' supply chains.

Military Exchanges

Indian Air Force (IAF) Chief Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari participated in the Berlin Air Show and flew a sortie in the Eurofighter.⁶ This has been the first of many military exchanges the two countries will see in 2024.

In August, the IAF is hosting its first multi-lateral air exercise, Tarang Shakti. Countries like the UK, France, and Spain will also be participating. German Luftwaffe will be deploying its Eurofighter fighter jets and an Airbus A-400 M transport aircraft. When the German Luftwaffe contingent flies into India for the exercises, the formation is going to be led by their chief himself.⁷ In addition, the A-400 M is in contention, along with the Brazilian C-390 Millennium and American C-130 J, for the Medium Transport Aircraft that the IAF is looking for.

The IAF is also weighing in on the transfer of technology that the original equipment manufacturer will be able to provide. In the request for information for the MTA, the IAF has asked

the foreign vendors to provide a general estimate of the cost of aircraft and associated equipment for a batch of 40, 60, and 80 aircraft.⁸

In October, Tarang Shakti will be followed by a port call by two German Navy ships– the frigate Baden-Württemberg and the combat supply ship Frankfurt am Main. Before entering the port of Goa, the two warships will conduct wargames with the Indian Navy. The warships are on a seven-month-long deployment to the Indo-Pacific.⁹

Germany's Taciturn Indo-Pacific Policy

Germany adopted the Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region 'Germany-Europe-Asia: shaping the 21st century together'.¹⁰ However, its diffidence in confronting its largest trading partner, China, had made it do a tightrope balancing diplomacy in the region. Hence, when the German warships undertook their first Indo-Pacific deployment in two decades in 2021, they made a request for a port call at Shanghai, much to the chagrin of Japan and Australia. Beijing rejected the call.

However, the Ukraine-Russia war shook the foundations of the European Peaceful order. The 2022 progress report mentioned that the "rules-based international order is coming under mounting pressure" in the Indo-Pacific region as geopolitical tensions are pushing the countries to the brink of conflict. This led to the expansion of the German policy guidelines.¹¹

In 2023, Germany released its first-ever National Security Strategy,¹² which reiterated that the Indo-Pacific "remains of special significance to Germany and Europe." The German government has taken a tougher stand towards China as indicated in its 2023 China Strategy.¹³ The strategy acknowledges that "China has changed" and asserts that China's political decisions warrant a change in its "approach to China".

It takes note of how China under Xi Jinping has been flouting international law, for instance, by ignoring the verdict of an international tribunal regarding the South China Sea, which rejected most of the territorial claims. China's economic coercion against countries, including EU member states like Lithuania, was also highlighted.

In the wake of this, the 2024 deployment of the German Navy will see it reassuring its allies that Germany is committed to the Indo-Pacific. Two warships will be taking part in the US-led RIMPAC-2024, the world's largest maritime war game. The German Luftwaffe will also be joining other European and Indo-Pacific air forces for war games called Pacific Skies-24.

The scheduled port call, includes Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and India. However, the decision on whether they will be traversing the Taiwan Strait, one of the flashpoints in the world today, will be made closer to the date.¹⁴ It is also possible that the transit does not happen, as Germany wants to protect its ties with China as well.

Also, its vague policies against China leave much to be desired. For instance, the German firm that refused to provide engines for Indian Light tanks, MTU, has been supplying engines for China's Luyang III-class missile destroyers and its Song-class submarine.¹⁵ The company has been taking advantage of the dual use clause in the European Union's arms embargo imposed against China following the 1989 Tiananmen Square.

Way Ahead

For India, the thawing of ties with Germany is definitely an opportunity to diversify its defence platform sourcing. Known for its engineering and state-of-the-art technology, New Delhi should take advantage of Germany offering advanced technology in conventional submarine development. Overcoming distrust of the past, Indo-German ties can sail on the back of a Fuel-Cell-based submarine deal.

India acquired four submarines from Germany in the 1980s. Two of the submarines were built in Germany, and the remaining two were built by MDL. The MDL failed to capitalise on the construction know-how to build the submarines, but the fact of the matter remains that these submarines never had to go back to Germany for retrofit. Unlike other submarines in the Indian Navy's inventory, these submarines were refurbished by MDL.

Submarines are going to be one of the critical technologies for India to counter-balance the rising maritime power of China. And if Berlin's Indo-Pacific push has been driven by its interests, New Delhi can play the game as well, prioritising its interests. In this instance, it is to achieve self-reliance in submarine making. After all, India is the only submarine-operating country without the capability to design and develop its own submarine.

Germany is ready to treat India like a strategic partner at par with Australia or Japan. It has shown commitment to easing defence trade with India. Germany should not let its concern for Russia drive its ties with India. Berlin will do well by taking a leaf out of the US playbook and acknowledging that India, too, has strategic interests. Over time, the two countries can forge stronger relations, but for that, Germany has to be in the Indo-Pacific for the long haul.

Notes:

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² Pandit Rajat, "Clear political will in Berlin now to boost defence ties with India: German envoy", *The Times of India*, March 4, 2024, [Clear political will in Berlin now to boost defence ties with India: German envoy | India News - Times of India \(indiatimes.com\)](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/indiatimes.com). Accessed on June 16, 2024.

³ Sharma, n.1.

⁴ Mattoo Shashank, "Germany deputy foreign minister 'optimistic' about multi-billion dollar submarine deal with India", *Mint*, February 27, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/germany-deputy-foreign-minister-optimistic-about-multi-billion-dollar-submarine-deal-with-india-11709021536624.html>. Accessed on June 16, 2024.

⁵ Peri Dinaker, "Germany allows India to buy small arms from its firms", *The Hindu*, April 27, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/germany-allows-india-to-buy-small-arms-from-its-firms/article68111289.ece>. Accessed on June 16, 2024.

⁶ "IAF chief flies sortie in Eurofighter aircraft at German airbase", *The Hindu*, June 8, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/iaf-chief-flies-sortie-in-eurofighter-aircraft-at-german-airbase/article68264755.ece>. Accessed on June 16, 2024.

⁷ Vaid Dharvi, "India, Germany push to boost defense ties", *Deutsche Welle*, March 25, 2024, [India, Germany push to boost defense ties – DW – 03/25/2024](https://www.dw.com/en/india-germany-push-to-boost-defense-ties/a-68264755). Accessed on June 16, 2024.

⁸ Sharma Ritu, "French A-400M 'Tests Mettle' With Indian Navy As It Competes With US C-130J & Brazilian C-390 For IAF Deal", *The Eurasian Times*, February 16, 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/airbus-a-400m-drills-with-indian-air-force-as/>. Accessed on June 16, 2024.

⁹ Pandit, n.2.

¹⁰ The Federal Government, "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region", September 2020, <https://china.diplo.de/blob/2381212/5038169e5f7c5eee4136c32ca183f75e/200904-indopazifik-data.pdf>. Accessed on June 16, 2024.

¹¹ Federal Foreign Office, "Stronger engagement in the Indo-Pacific region", September 14, 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/ausienpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/indo-pacific-progress-report/2551714>. Accessed on June 16, 2024.

¹² The Federal Government, "National Security Strategy", <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>. Accessed on June 17, 2024.

¹³ The Federal Government, "Strategy on China", <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2608580/49d50fecc479304c3da2e2079c55e106/china-strategie-en-data.pdf>. Accessed on June 17, 2024.

¹⁴ Lisa-Martin Small, "Indo-Pacific Deployment: Bundeswehrpräsenz als Signal an China und Nordkorea", *Table Security*, March 25, 2024, <https://table.media/security/analyse/indo-pacific-deployment-bundeswehrpraesenz-als-signal-an-china-und-nordkorea/>. Accessed June 17, 2024.

¹⁵ Rivkin Amanda, "<https://www.dw.com/en/german-engine-technology-found-in-chinese-warships-report/a-59740301>", *Deutsche Welle*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-engine-technology-found-in-chinese-warships-report/a-59740301>. Accessed on June 17, 2024.