

The German Navy Returns to the Pacific Ocean to Militarily Encircle China

By [German Foreign Policy](#)

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In-depth Report: [Tensions in the South China Sea](#)

BERLIN/BEIJING – In light of the escalating conflict in the South China Sea, the German Navy is, for the first time, participating in a large-scale maneuver in the Pacific Ocean. Mine clearance divers and other support personnel from the naval infantry (“marines”) stationed in Eckernförde, near Kiel, will be involved in the “RIMPAC 2016” combat exercise, organized by the US Navy, over the next few days, training in various military operations in the Pacific. A total of 25,000 soldiers from 26 countries, coming from the main NATO powers and the most important US allies along the Pacific Coast of Latin America, in the South Pacific and in East and Southeast Asia will be participating. China is involved in some of the training measures, however, explicitly excluded from others. There is a question, if China will be invited to participate in subsequent RIMPAC maneuvers. At the same time, the US military is developing plans for operations, according to western military experts, against China’s defensive lines, erected on islands and artificial reefs in the South China Sea. Tension has been rising since yesterday’s decision by the UN’s Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on a territorial dispute. The EU has begun discussing participation in naval patrols near the Chinese coast.

Maritime Route Control

Over the next few days, German naval forces will participate, for the first time in history, in a major maneuver in the Pacific Ocean. From June 30 to August 4, the world’s largest naval combat maneuver, RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) is taking place, organized – initially annually, and since 1974, bi-annually – by the US Navy since 1971. The main theatre is the maritime region near Hawaii. Altogether, around 25,000 soldiers from 26 nations are taking part in operations using 45 ships, five submarines and more than 200 aircraft. The German Navy is participating with 20 mine clearance divers and support personnel from the naval infantry unit based in Eckernförde. As announced by the Bundeswehr, in the context of RIMPAC, “a wide range of skills” will be exercised “ranging from the security of maritime traffic, disaster relief, to complex military operations.” Therefore, it includes, for example, “amphibian operations, anti-submarine and aerial defense exercises as well as anti-piracy combat and mine clearance operations.”[1] “The overall objective” is to “demonstrate military flexibility,” which “serves the security of global maritime routes.”

Allies against China

Traditionally, the United States – which has appropriated a role of hegemonic power on the high seas for itself – has integrated close allies into its RIMPAC maneuvers. These series of combat maneuvers were launched together with the naval forces of Great Britain, Canada,

Australia, and New Zealand in 1971. The number of participating nations has since been greatly expanded. Important NATO members (France, the Netherlands, Norway) have repeatedly been involved. Over the past few days, for the first time, units from Germany, Italy, and Denmark are taking part – proof of the systematic expansion of the RIMPAC fleet. Washington’s main Southeast Asian military partners, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, have sent troops, alongside soldiers sent from the USA’s close cooperation partners of the “Pacific Alliance”[2] Latin American countries – Mexico, Columbia, Peru, and Chile. This year, three other Southeast Asian countries (Brunei, Indonesia; and Malaysia) as well as India are onboard. Both Washington and Berlin have been trying to win India over to their side in their struggle against the People’s Republic of China.[3]

Challenger

The partner, no longer taking part in the combat exercises – particularly those controlling the Pacific maritime routes – is Russia. In 2012, Russian units were invited to participate in the RIMPAC maneuvers for the first time, but were then excluded again in 2014, because of the escalation of the Ukraine conflict. China was first invited to participate in 2014, and is sending warships to Hawaii again this year, even though they will be excluded from some of the exercises, with which the western naval units are preparing for joint operations in the future.[4] However, there are indications that in RIMPAC 2018, the People’s Republic of China will no longer be participating. Already last year, John McCain, Chair of the US Senate Defense Committee, explicitly called for rescinding the invitation to China for this year’s RIMPAC maneuvers.[5] However, the Obama administration, at the moment, does not want to burn the bridges to the People’s Republic of China, given the tensions in the South China Sea, and insists therefore on the partial participation of the Chinese Navy. Nevertheless, this decision is sharply contested by influential forces in Washington. It is not appropriate for China to participate in RIMPAC, as long as “it is challenging U.S. naval dominance in parts of the South China Sea,” admonish his critics, at the beginning of the maneuvers.[6]

Perhaps no Longer Under Control

Whereas this is the German Navy’s first time RIMPAC participation and therefore considering a military engagement in the Pacific, the US military is already drawing up operational plans for the contingency that conflicts in the South China Sea escalate. The plans contain reflections on how to neutralize Chinese defense systems, according to the US Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. John Richardson. The premise is that China will set up these defense systems on the artificial reefs in the South China Sea. According to reports from US military circles, the US Navy is thinking of “a whole range of counters.”[7] Examples are cyber attacks to disrupt enemy command networks, and inject false information, according to reports. Another option would be offensive strikes against the enemy, while using missile defense to down incoming enemy missiles. Last week it was announced that such a US missile defense system will be installed in South Korea.[8] While the US military is drawing up plans against Chinese South China Sea positions, experts are confirming that their implementation should in no way be considered improbable. “The South China Sea territorial disputes are likely to persist for a long time,” said Bonnie Glaser, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington. “The question” is not whether they can be “resolved,” but if they “can be managed,” or not. [9]

Ready to Attack

In the South China Sea, tensions, in the meantime, are escalating. Yesterday, Tuesday, the UN's Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, responding to a dispute brought by the Philippines over the territorial sovereignty of various islands and reefs in that area, arrived at a decision denying China's historically based claims to them, a decision supporting – or at least reinforcing – the claims of pro-western countries bordering the sea. Quite awhile ago, Beijing had announced that it was prepared to seek a negotiated settlement to the dispute with Manila, in consideration of a balance of interests and declared that it would not recognize the Court of Arbitration's final judgment. The latter was reconfirmed yesterday. Also an element of this international dispute is the fact that, as military experts point out, control over the South China Sea is crucial to the People's Republic of China's defense capability (german-foreign-policy.com reported [10]). Sending two aircraft carrier battle groups into the South China Sea, in mid-June, the United States demonstrated its combat readiness. The EU plans to join them and is considering joint naval patrols close to China's coasts.[11] If these plans materialize, Germany's military presence in the Pacific Ocean will not remain limited to RIMPAC 2016. Germany would become part of the western powers' military troop concentrations against Beijing.

NOTES

[1] RIMPAC 2016: Deutsche Premiere. www.marine.de 27.06.2016.

[2] Zur Pazifik-Allianz see [The Strategy of the Pacific Alliance](#) and [Hoffnungsträger der Industrie](#).

[3] See [Anti-China Cooperation](#) and [Contain China](#).

[4] Jürg Kürsener: Ein scharf beäugter Gast in Pearl Harbor. www.nzz.ch 29.06.2016.

[5] McCain: Disinvite China from Next Year's RIMPAC Exercise. www.military.com 06.05.2016.

[6] Wyatt Olson: China remains hot topic as biennial RIMPAC drills kick off. www.stripes.com 05.07.2016.

[7] Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.: UN Ruling Won't End South China Sea Dispute: Navy Studies Next Clash. breakingdefense.com 20.06.2016.

[8] See [At the Russian Border](#).

[9] Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.: UN Ruling Won't End South China Sea Dispute: Navy Studies Next Clash. breakingdefense.com 20.06.2016.

[10-11] See [Ostasiens Mittelmeer \(I\)](#) and [Ostasiens Mittelmeer \(II\)](#).

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