

SWP Research Paper

Felix Heiduk

Germany's Value-based Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 4
March 2024, Berlin

- Diversifying Germany's bilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific is one of the central goals of German policy. On the one hand, this diversification aims to reduce economic dependence on China, and on the other – in the context of systemic rivalry with authoritarian states – to bring about cooperation with states that share common values with Germany, so-called Wertepartnern (value-based partners).
- However, it is not clearly defined which values are fundamental to value-based partnerships. It also remains unclear which states in the Indo-Pacific are referred to as value-based partners and how these value-based partnerships differ from “normal” bilateral relations with other states in the region.
- Instead, this study shows that the significance that is rhetorically attached to cooperation with value-based partners is at odds with the vague concept of “value-based partnership” and its limited importance as a basis for bilateral cooperation.
- A comparison of value-based partners with a control group of non-value-based partners across different policy areas produces mixed results. The assumed correlation between being categorised as a value-based partner and closer international cooperation based on shared norms and values cannot, with any coherence, be demonstrated empirically.
- A comprehensive revision of the hitherto diffuse concept of value-based partnerships is recommended – either by normative sharpening, combined with a narrowing of the circle of states designated as value-based partners, or by eradicating the term from the political vocabulary.

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SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute
for International
and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Germany
Phone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-200
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN (Print) 2747-5123
ISSN (Online) 1863-1053
DOI: 10.18449/2024RP04

(English version of
SWP-Studie 2/2024)

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Dr Felix Heiduk is Head of the Asia Division at SWP.

The author would like to thank Simona Beckemeier for her support with the overall research and the realisation of data analysis with MAXQDA.

Germany's Value-based Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific between the east coast of Africa and the American Pacific coast is the most economically dynamic region in the world and is also the centre of the Sino-American great power rivalry. A destabilisation of even parts of this region due to further deterioration in Sino-US relations would have a massive negative impact on Germany's economic interests in the Indo-Pacific. For decades, Germany has overtly fostered ties with one regional partner: the People's Republic of China. An over-dependence on the People's Republic of China, which has been growing for decades, must now be reduced by a diversification of its partnerships. However, reducing Germany's economic dependence on China is not the only aim. Rather, the debate about the diversification of regional partners is embedded in a broader international context, wherein Germany sees itself as being in global systemic competition with authoritarian states, particularly China. Germany has therefore been increasingly searching for new partners in the Indo-Pacific for some time.

Special importance is therefore attached to so-called value-based partnerships – partners who are perceived as like-minded and with whom Germany shares common values in the context of systemic competition between liberal democracies and authoritarian, illiberal states. Beyond such generalisations, however, the concept of value-based partnerships remains largely nebulous. Decision-makers do not clearly specify which values are constitutive for value-based partnerships, nor which states in the region are counted as value-based partners nor how such partnerships differ from “normal” bilateral relations with other states in the region. This lack of clarity forms the starting point of this study.

The following analysis makes it clear that the importance rhetorically attached to cooperation with so-called value-based partners is not only at odds with the vague concept of value partnerships, but also with its limited significance in practice. This becomes apparent, firstly, by the fact that the term “value-based partners” is applied to a thoroughly heterogeneous group of states whose members have very different qualities in terms of democratic governance.

Secondly, analysis of the attributes used in connection with value-based partnerships shows that the majority of attributes used do not focus so much on normative aspects of governance, but rather on the expected international behaviour of those value-based partners – for example, regarding the preservation of rules-based international order. A third finding of the study is that there is no observable correlation between attribution as a value-based partner and close international cooperation with a state characterised as such on the basis of shared norms and values. On the contrary, the comparison of value-based partners with a control group of non-value-based partners across different policy areas (including international human rights policy, as well as protection of the rule of law) produces mixed results. Hence, the assumed correlation between being characterised as a value-based partner and closer international cooperation based on shared norms and values cannot really be demonstrated empirically.

In view of these findings, a comprehensive revision of the hitherto diffuse concept of value-based partnerships is recommended. At least two approaches to revise the concept are conceivable here: One possibility would be to sharpen the concept in the sense of a narrow framework of norms based on liberal values. Consequently, some of the current value-based partners would no longer be labelled as such. The circle of value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific would thus be limited to a few states with which there is an extensive convergence of norms and with which international cooperation in the respective policy areas could be closely coordinated. The other option would be to tacitly eradicate the vague, incoherent term “value-based partnership” from the political vocabulary. Instead of using this label to refer to a value-based special relationship with certain states, the search for partners in the Indo-Pacific would then focus on common interests. This would also be more in line with established practices of German foreign policy in the region.

Searching for partners in the Indo-Pacific: more diversification, less focus on China

The Indo-Pacific is of increasing geo-economic significance to Germany due to its strong economic dynamism. The Indo-Pacific region is not only home to important trade and investment partners, such as China, Japan, South Korea, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),¹ but is also generally home to some of the fastest growing economies in the world. However, the Indo-Pacific is much more than a geographical or economic area. The concept of the Indo-Pacific is also a response to the rise of China and Beijing's associated claim to power in the region. The latter's claim to power is perceived as a strategic challenge not only by the USA, but also by an increasing number of neighbouring states. Thus, the Indo-Pacific is also a decidedly geopolitical term, particularly since it is precisely in this region that the US-Chinese rivalry is primarily being played out, the course of which will have a decisive influence on the development of the future regional and international order.²

In 2020, the German government under Chancellor Angela Merkel took these broader developments into account when drawing up its guidelines on the Indo-Pacific: they not only defined Germany's interests in the region, but also set out a series of foreign policy objectives. One of the central goals – which is also true of the current German government – is to

reduce Germany's economic dependence on China. The main reason for this is that Berlin does not see China under the leadership of Xi Jinping as simply an economic partner, but increasingly as a competitor and systemic rival. Reducing Germany's economic dependence on China, often referred to as “de-risking” in Berlin, is to be achieved primarily by diversifying Berlin's relations, i.e. by turning to other partners in the region.³

For decades, Germany's Asia policy focused on bilateral cooperation with the People's Republic of China. Other Asian states, even regional heavyweights such as Japan or India, played no prominent role in strategic debates or in Germany's observable foreign and security policy behaviour; they also played second fiddle with regards to Germany's trade and investment in Asia.

From Berlin's perspective, however, diversification is not solely due to economic over-dependency. Rather, the debate about diversifying regional partners is part of a broader international context in which Germany is embedded into a global systemic competition:⁴ authoritarian states, above all China and Russia, are challenging liberal democracies. They do so, according to the dominant view in Berlin, not only by putting pressure on the rules-based order, international law and universal human rights, but also by attempting to weaken liberal societies through hybrid threats, disinformation and manipulation.

¹ Member states of ASEAN are Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

² Felix Heiduk and Gudrun Wacker, *From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. Significance, Implementation and Challenges*, SWP Research Paper 9/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2020), doi: 10.18449/2020RP09; Angela Stanzel and Clara Hörning, *Deutscher Balanceakt im Indo-Pazifik – Geostrategische Herausforderungen und Möglichkeiten für die Bundesrepublik*, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022A64.

³ The Federal Government, *Leitlinien zum Indo-Pazifik* (Berlin, August 2020), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380500/33f978a9d4f511942c241eb4602086c1/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

⁴ Fedeagbaoutral Ministry of Defence, *Positionspapier: Gedanken zur Bundeswehr der Zukunft* (Berlin, 9 February 2021).

In the diversification process, special attention is paid to partners with whom Germany shares common values.

Therefore, regarding Germany's partners in the Indo-Pacific, diversification is also always about "strengthening the political dimension of relations". Hence, "closing ranks with the democracies and value-based partners in the region" is of particular importance.⁵ Particular attention is therefore paid to those partners who are perceived as "like-minded"⁶ and with whom Germany shares common values.

This is also the view of the current German government, which refers to a "values-based"⁷ positioning of German foreign policy in the coalition agreement and aims to intensify relations with value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific region.⁸ There are already initial signs of this, for example in security policy: Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand attended a NATO summit as guests for the first time in 2022. And countries from Europe, including Germany with the deployment of its frigate "Bayern", are in turn becoming increasingly involved in security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

This approach assumes that such countries represent close and reliable partners for German foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific chiefly because of a congruence of norms and values. However, it is striking that in the debate on diversification, it is neither officially specified which group of states in the Indo-Pacific region belong to the category of "value-based partners", nor is it clearly defined which values exactly are constitutive for such partnerships. The latter fact has become a target for critics of a so-called values-based German foreign policy.⁹

Furthermore, Political science research on Germany's special relations, which also deals with sub-categories like "strategic partnerships", "value partnerships" and other forms of bilateral relations, also provides hardly any insights regarding Asia or the Indo-Pacific. For a long time, this strand of research focused on Germany's relations with other European countries such as France or Poland, with Israel or its transatlantic partnerships. Any special relations between Germany and countries in Asia or the Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, with the exception of the German-Chinese strategic partnership,¹⁰ have not to date been subject to much research. In general, the debate about value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific remains nebulous and difficult to grasp.

This study therefore examines three closely related research questions. Firstly, which states are labelled as value-based partners on the German side, and which bilateral relations with states in the region are understood as value-based partnerships? Secondly, which norms and values are central to value-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific? And thirdly, how do the so-called value-based partnerships differ (conceptually and in practice) from "normal" bilateral relations with states in the region? The time-frame under investigation covers the years from 2020 (the year in which the term "Indo-Pacific" entered official parlance; until then, the term "Asia-Pacific" was used) to 2022.

Although the term "value-based partnerships" with reference to the Indo-Pacific has only been in use for a few years, this study assumes that the partnerships themselves are based on an assumed convergence of values that already existed in the past. This previous convergence of norms and values then forms the historical foundation on which the classification as

5 The Federal Government, *Leitlinien* (see note 3), 9.

6 Federal Foreign Office, "Eröffnungsrede von Außenminister Heiko Maas anlässlich des Berliner Forum Außenpolitik der Körber Stiftung", (Berlin, 23 November 2021), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/maas-koerber/2497280>.

7 Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens, Free Democratic Party (FDP), *Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Coalition Agreement 2021 – 2025* (Berlin, 2021), 113.

8 *Ibid.*, 125.

9 Daniel Marwecki, "Die neue Außenpolitik ist selbstgerecht", *JACOBIN Magazin* (Blog), 17 December 2021, <https://jacobin.de/artikel/die-neue-aussenpolitik-ist-selbstgerecht-annalena-baerbock-china-russland-wertegeleitete-aussen>

politik; Eric Gujer, "Annalena Baerbock will Deutschland auf einen gefährlichen Irrweg führen", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24 December 2021, <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/der-andere-blick/annalena-baerbock-ihre-aussenpolitik-ist-ein-irrweg-ld.1661731>.

10 Felix Heiduk, "What Is in a Name? Germany's Strategic Partnerships with Asia's Rising Powers," *Asia Europe Journal* 13, no. 2 (2015): 131 – 46; Thomas Heberer and Anja Senz, "Die deutsche Chinapolitik," in *Deutsche Außenpolitik*, ed. Thomas Jäger, Alexander Höse and Kai Oppermann, 2d ed. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011), 673 – 92; Hans Kundnani and Jonas Parello-Plesner, *China and Germany: Why the Emerging Special Relationship Matters for Europe*, Policy Brief 55 (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2012).

value-based partners now takes place. Otherwise, the alternative supposition would be that value-based partnerships are linked to primarily transformative assumptions; in other words, characterisation as a value-based partner would lead to a liberal transformation in the partner in the future and ultimately bring about a later convergence of values in the medium or long term.

Given that the term “value-based partner” or “value-based partnership” is primarily a political attribution, used by political decision-makers, rather than an analytical concept or category, this study proceeds inductively. The first step is to identify the value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific. This can be done by drawing on an extensive corpus of documents from strategy papers and other official documents, transcripts of parliamentary debates and press conferences as well as media interviews. In the second step, the norms and values most frequently mentioned in connection with the value-based partners or partnerships in the Indo-Pacific are identified by means of a qualitative content analysis of the document corpus. Because the actual values and norms are almost never listed exhaustively, their importance and bearing are inferred from the salience of attributes that are used to describe the normative foundation of value-based partnerships. The more frequently that attributes such as “democracy/democratic” or “rule of law” are mentioned in official documents (higher salience), the more important a particular attribute is for the value-based partnerships.

Finally, in the third step, a number of key policy areas for Germany’s international cooperation with value-based partners are identified. A comparison between eight of the named value-based partners and an equally large control group of non-value-based partners¹¹ is used to analyse whether the assumed norm convergence that forms the basis of value-based partnerships holds across actual policy areas, and whether differences in Germany’s cooperation with value-based partners and non-value-based partners correlate with the status of the state in question.

¹¹ The control group comprises Bangladesh, China, Fiji, Cambodia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. In order to minimise any distortion of results, the group was composed in such a way that it has the greatest possible diversity with regard to factors such as regime type, population size, economic development and the degree of bilateral relations with Germany.

Value-based partnerships as special relations in international politics

The term “special relationship” has been used frequently over previous decades at the diplomatic level to characterise bilateral relations in international politics. It goes back to Winston Churchill, who described the warm relations between the USA and the United Kingdom as a “special relationship” in 1946, citing their close historical, cultural, political, economic and, in particular, military ties.¹² Since then, policy-makers and academics alike have used the term to describe or analyse a fairly diverse set of bilateral relationships. In addition to the relationship between Washington and London, French-German, Israeli-German, Polish-German and US-Australian relations have also been labelled as special relationships, amongst others. However, the popularity of the term and concept is at least partly at odds with its lack of analytical and definitional clarity. It is generally recognised that special relations

- (almost) always involve bilateral relations between states or state-like entities,
- have a particular and exclusive character, thereby going beyond the formal equality of all states codified in international law,
- almost always are to be understood as a positive attribute and
- are often interpreted as a permanent, stable counterpart to temporary, ad hoc partnerships, both by the partners themselves and by third parties.¹³

12 Winston Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace” (Fulton, 5 March 1946), <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/>.

13 Kai Oppermann and Mischa Hansel, “The Ontological Security of Special Relationships: The Case of Germany’s Relations with Israel”, *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 1 (2019): 79–100, doi: 10.1017/eis.2018.18.

It is also argued that special relationships differ from “normal” bilateral relationships in that the former are not based solely on shared political, economic and material interests. They are also based on a common set of values.¹⁴ A second argument posits that regime type (democracy) is constitutive for the formation and continuation of a special relationship. While seemingly logical and straightforward, this argument raises more questions than it answers. Firstly, a pure, completely utilitarian politics of interest rarely occurs in reality. Secondly, the significance of democratic governance for the emergence of special relationships has been called into question by comparative research. Comparative analyses have shown that both democratic and authoritarian states enter into special relationships: “[...] the establishment and continued existence of special relationships between states [cannot] be clearly attributed to the complementarity of the regime type”.¹⁵

Rather, systematically collected findings suggest that a combination of “material objectives” and “idealistic convictions” prompts governments to seek or maintain special relationships. However, current research remains inconclusive regarding:

- what role the regime type plays in the formation of special relationships,
- the relationship between material objectives and idealistic convictions,

14 Heiduk, “What Is in a Name?” (see note 10).

15 Sebastian Harnisch, Kai Oppermann and Klaus Brummer, “Konklusion: Sonderbeziehungen zwischen Außenpolitik und internationalen Beziehungen”, in: idem., eds., *Sonderbeziehungen als Nexus zwischen Außenpolitik und internationalen Beziehungen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015), 369–80 (377).

- what significance the recognition of a bilateral relationship as a “special relationship” by third countries has and
- which factors can explain the change (or even the termination) of a special relationship.¹⁶

For this reason, even relevant specialist publications have come to the conclusion that the concept of “special relations” in international relations has so far not only remained very vague in terms of definition but also that its analytical usefulness is questionable. If and when the term is used as an analytical category, its interpretation and definition are usually taken directly from the accounts of political actors.¹⁷ Moreover, the term special relationship is used to describe a variety of very different bilateral relationships – from the British-American¹⁸ to the German-Chinese¹⁹ to the Chinese-Ethiopian.²⁰

**“Value-based partnerships”
are primarily a category of
political practice rather than an
analytical category.**

In addition, terms such as “strategic partnership”²¹ and “value-based partnership” are subsumed under the umbrella term “special relations” and can therefore be understood as part of a (growing) family of special relations in international politics. “Strategic partnerships” and “value-based partnerships” are given very similar attributes in political practice and the two terms are sometimes even used interchangeably. In contrast to this conceptual vagueness, in foreign policy practice “special relations”, “strategic partnerships” and “value partnerships” are often referred to with certainty, in turn suggesting that they are fixed, clearly understood terms.

However, if any bilateral relationship is to be considered “special” analytically simply because they are officially labelled as special relationships, this then

calls into question the usefulness of such a broad and open category: “If special relationships are everywhere, then they are nowhere.”²² Some observers therefore generally describe the term “special relationships” as a “myth”.²³

All of this makes a deductive approach to the topic of value-based partnerships difficult. Nevertheless, the term is currently an integral part of Germany’s political practice. Not engaging with it solely due to conceptual ambiguity is not an option. Thus, the basic assumption of this study is that “special relationships”, including “value-based partnerships”, are primarily a category of political practice rather than an analytical category, and they will be treated accordingly throughout this study.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kristin Haugevik, *Special Relationships in World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2020), 14.

¹⁸ John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq*, 2d ed. (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁹ Kundnani and Parello-Plesner, *China and Germany* (see note 10).

²⁰ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China and Ethiopia: Authoritarian Affinities and Economic Cooperation”, *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (2012): 53–62, doi: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.6041.

²¹ Heiduk, “What Is in a Name?” (see note 10).

²² Haugevik, *Special Relationships in World Politics* (see note 17), 17.

²³ John Baylis, “The ‘Special Relationship’: A Diverting British Myth?”, in *Haunted by History. Myths in International Relations*, ed. Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser (Oxford: Bergahn Books, 1998), 119–25; Priya Chacko, “A New ‘Special Relationship’? Power Transitions, Ontological Security, and India-US Relations,” *International Studies Perspectives* 15, no. 3 (2014): 329–46, doi: 10.1111/insp.12029; Patrick Porter, “Last Charge of the Knights? Iraq, Afghanistan and the Special Relationship”, *International Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2010): 355–75, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00886.x.

Values and value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific

Value-based partners

In Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines, published in 2020, Singapore, Australia, Japan and South Korea are explicitly listed as value-based partners. In the 2021 coalition agreement, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea are named as value-based partners.²⁴ In recent years, German government representatives have also publicly referred to Mongolia,²⁵ India,²⁶ Taiwan²⁷ and Indonesia²⁸ as value-based partners. The term is used by the Chancellery, various ministries and the Bundestag. This results in a list of nine players in the region that German officials have categorised as value-based partners since the term "Indo-Pacific" made its way into the official discourse: Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. To compile this list cumulatively was necessary, as no exhaustive list of regional value-based partners in official strategy papers such as the Indo-Pacific Guidelines exists.

²⁴ Social Democratic Party, Alliance 90/The Greens, Free Democratic Party, *Mehr Fortschritt wagen* (see note 7), 125.

²⁵ German Embassy Ulan Bator, "Mongolisch-deutsche Kooperation im Verteidigungsbereich" (2 August 2022), <https://ulan-bator.diplo.de/mn-de/-/2545506>.

²⁶ "Besuch in Neu-Delhi. Baerbock würdigt Indien als Wertepartner", *tagesschau.de*, 5 December 2022, <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/baerbock-indien-111.html>.

²⁷ Federal Foreign Office, "Deutschland und Taiwan: Bilaterale Beziehungen" (Berlin, 22 September 2023), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/service/laender/taiwan-node/bilateral/200904>.

²⁸ The Federal Government, "Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz zu der Teilnahme am deutsch-japanischen Wirtschaftsdialog am 28. April 2022 in Tokio" (Tokyo, 28 April 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/rede-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-zu-der-teilnahme-am-deutsch-japanischen-wirtschaftsdialog-am-28-april-2022-in-tokio-2028764>.

While the triad of "democracy, the rule of law and human rights"²⁹ is evidently accorded great importance as the normative basis of a "value-based"³⁰ foreign policy, the Indo-Pacific Guidelines explicitly refer to "democracies and value-based partners".³¹ In turn, it can initially be inferred that value-based partners do not necessarily always have to be democracies. However, all nine states classified as value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific are also categorised as democracies in the standard indices (see p. 18ff). All nine are also considered to be relatively liberal economies. In this context, however, it should be mentioned that the nine states range across an extremely broad spectrum in terms of the quality of their democratic governance and the openness of their economies. It also seems apparent that the labelling of a state as a value-based partner is somewhat static. When examining the official discourse, it is an open question whether domestic political changes such as democratic regression or the systematic violation of human or civil rights necessarily entail a change in status as a value-based partner. The diversity, in terms of the quality of democratic governance, of states that officially function as value-based partners supports this assumption.

Nevertheless, it is also apparent that the current selection of value-based partners points to the assumption that the implied fundamental values and norms are at their core decidedly democratic and liberal. Statements by members of the German government reinforce this conclusion: for example, India, as Germany's value-based partner, is described

²⁹ Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, "Fortschritt für eine gerechte Welt" (Berlin, 1 January 2023), <https://www.g7germany.de/g7-de/suche/g7-abschluss-2154642>.

³⁰ Social Democratic Party, Alliance 90/The Greens, Free Democratic Party, *Mehr Fortschritt wagen* (see note 7), 113.

³¹ The Federal Government, *Leitlinien* (see note 3), 9.

as an “emerging economic power and established democracy”.³² And the partnership with Japan “is particularly important in difficult times because it is based on shared values”. The latter include, above all, Germany and Japan’s joint commitment “to freedom, openness, the rule of law and democracy”. In this context, “openness” is predominantly understood as “open economies”.³³

Underlying values

However, systematic analysis of the content of official documents with regard to the central attributes used to describe value-based partnerships only partially supports the anecdotal observations outlined above. It is striking that the most common attribution of a common or shared value in connection with a value-based partnership is striving for the preservation or defence of the rules-based international order. In almost 80 per cent of the 38 documents analysed, the attribute “preservation” or “defence of the rules-based international order” is used in connection with value-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific (see Table 1). For example, Federal Chancellor Scholz said as much at a press conference in Tokyo: “Germany and Japan stand side by side in the defence of the rules-based international order, in upholding the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and in our commitment to universal human rights.”³⁴

In some cases, this attribution is also accompanied by the adjective “liberal”, i.e. reference is made to the “liberal rules-based international order” – but not always. It therefore remains unclear what exactly is regarded as the normative foundation of the rules-based international order: international law, based on the sovereign equality of all member states of the

³² Annalena Baerbock, quoted in Johannes Leithäuser, “Baerbock in Indien. Mobilitätspartnerschaft zwischen Berlin und Neu Delhi”, *FAZ.net*, 6 January 2023, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/annalena-baerbock-in-indien-abkommen-zu-mobilitaet-und-migration-18511539.html>.

³³ The Federal Government, “Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz” (see note 28).

³⁴ The Federal Government, “Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und Ministerpräsident Kishida zum Besuch von Bundeskanzler Scholz in Japan am 28. April 2022” (Tokyo, 28 April 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/bregde/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-ministerpraesident-kishida-zum-besuch-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-in-japan-am-28-april-2022-2028824>.

Table 1

Attributes (frequency of naming) of value-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

Attribute	Mention in documents*	per cent
Order	30	78.95
Security	20	52.63
Economy	18	47.37
Democracy	17	44.74
Research, education	10	26.32
Technology	9	23.68
Climate, environment	8	21.05
Rule of law	7	18.42
Human rights	7	18.42

* A total of 38 documents were analysed.

Source: Author’s own compilation.

United Nations (UN), or more liberal interpretations of a rules-based order that emphasise the protection of individual freedoms and human rights more strongly. Official strategy papers such as the National Security Strategy offer no clarification, since the international order is presented as being based on two different foundations: on the one hand on “international law and the Charter of the United Nations”,³⁵ and on the other hand on “promotion of human development in all parts of the world in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals”.³⁶ In any case, the content analysis makes it clear that, at least in terms of salience, attributes such as “democracy/form of government”, “rule of law” or “human rights” are used much less frequently than “preservation” or “defence of the rules-based international order”.

“Regional security” and “regional stability in the Indo-Pacific” is the second most frequently used attribute, in over 50 per cent of the documents examined. For example, the Indo-Pacific guidelines mention “cyber security policy cooperation and dialogue with value partners in the region (including Singapore, Australia, Japan and South Korea)”, which

³⁵ The Federal Government, *National Security Strategy* (Berlin, June 2023), 11, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

Table 2

Attributes (common references to) value-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific*

Attribute	Order	Security	Economy	Democracy	Research, education	Technology	Climate, environment	Rule of law	Human rights
Order	0	18	14	14	7	8	7	7	5
Security	18	0	6	8	2	3	3	3	2
Economy	14	6	0	10	8	9	8	3	6
Democracy	14	8	10	0	5	4	4	5	5
Research, education	7	2	8	5	0	4	1	0	4
Technology	8	3	9	4	4	0	6	2	2
Climate, environment	7	3	8	4	1	6	0	2	2
Rule of law	7	3	3	5	0	2	2	0	0
Human rights	5	2	6	5	4	2	2	0	0

* A total of 38 documents were analysed. Source: Author's own compilation.

aim to “strengthen the protection of their own information and communication systems, collective defence capabilities and resilience to growing threats in cyber and information space”.³⁷

The third most common attribute is “open markets” or “free market economy”. For example, former Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer described the deployment of the frigate “Bayern” to the Indo-Pacific as “a clear sign of free trade routes” – a symbol “that is particularly well perceived by our partners in the Indo-Pacific, who share the same values as we do”.³⁸ This attribute is often linked to Germany's self-image as a “trading nation”. The Indo-Pacific Guidelines state: “As a globally active trading nation and advocate of a rules-based international order, Germany – embedded in the European Union – has a strong interest in participating in Asia's growth dynamics and in helping to shape the Indo-Pacific and implement global norms in regional structures.”³⁹

³⁷ The Federal Government, *Leitlinien* (see note 3), 16.

³⁸ Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, *Dokumentation 12. Nationale Maritime Konferenz. Wirtschaft braucht MEER* (Berlin, December 2021), 36, https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Maritime%20Wirtschaft/12-nationale-maritime-konferenz.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=4.

³⁹ The Federal Government, *Leitlinien* (see note 3), 8.

Only in fourth place does the attribute “democracy” come into play. “Human rights” and “rule of law” are mentioned even less frequently: they are cited in less than 20 per cent of the documents examined.

If we look at the combination of attributes used to describe value-based partners or value-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, we can see that “international order” and “security” are most frequently used in tandem. The second most common combination is “international order” and “economy”, followed by “international order” and “democracy” (see Table 2). The most salient attributes, alone or in combination, that are used as part of the German discourse on the Indo-Pacific to describe the value-based partners and cooperation with them are thus only partially congruent with the expected triad of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. They are often attributes that refer to the expected international behaviour of these partners – for example with regard to the preservation of the rules-based international order – instead of referring to more normative aspects.

Furthermore, it is apparent that the majority of the German foreign policy actors that were analysed understand these motives and objectives to be primarily of a defensive nature. A defence against threats and challenges is to be constructed in cooperation with value-based partners. The threats and challenges include the threat to peace and international stability, the threat of fragmentation of the rules-based inter-

national order, but also insecurity in cyberspace (especially disinformation campaigns on the internet), the growing influence of authoritarian states, and climate change, amongst others. The inherent assumption is that Germany will be better able to strategically counter all of this through value-based partnerships.

International cooperation and value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific

The use of the term “value-based partnership” represents a special relationship, a special bond with one or more value-based partners, founded on shared norms and principles. The term there has an exclusively positive connotation. This in turn makes the distinction between value-based partners and non-value-based partners (the others) particularly relevant: the others are either the cause of the challenges that are to be addressed by forming value-based partnerships (e.g. they challenge the rules-based international order), or they are at least not suitable for cooperation to the same extent as value-based partners due to norm divergence.

The attributes used are also more than a mere description of a special relationship based on declared shared values. In almost all of the sources analysed, they also refer to foreign policy motives and shared strategic goals. It can therefore be assumed, at least implicitly, that policy makers at least assume that certain foreign policy motives or goals can be better pursued by entering a value-based partnership based on a perceived congruence of values. This seems to include the assumption that the specific values that (should) form the basis of the value-based partnership are linked to the strategic objectives of German foreign policy. Therefore, the aim and purpose of value-based partnerships is at the very least to preserve or even strengthen those declared common values internationally through close cooperation with value-based partners.

If one considers the degree of institutionalisation of bilateral relations as an indicator for close cooperation with some (although not all) of Germany’s so-called value-based partners, this assumption initially makes sense. For example, Berlin maintains intergovernmental consultations with the USA, France, the Netherlands and India. However, it also holds such consultations with non-value-based partners such as China, thereby weakening the presumed link

between degree of institutionalisation and norms convergence.

In the following, the extent to which the above-mentioned assumptions are justified is examined on the basis of the five fields of interest of protection: the rules-based international order, free trade/open markets, democratic governance, the rule of law and international human rights norms. This is facilitated by the comparison of an experimental group of eight countries from the identified value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific and an equally large control group of regional non-value-based partners.

Rules-based international order

In connection with the importance of value-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, German officials repeatedly express the goal of preserving the rules-based international order and strengthening multilateral cooperation. With regard to the importance of these goals, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which violated international law, was certainly a key event. In response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, Germany supported five different resolutions in 2022, which were voted on at the UN General Assembly in New York, designed to uphold the rules-based international order. Germany voted in favour of all resolutions. Although none of the eight countries labelled as value-based partners voted against any of the resolutions supported by Germany, the voting behaviour of the eight Indo-Pacific value-based partners on the five resolutions is certainly more heterogeneous than the label “value-based partner” would suggest (see Table 3, p. 16).

Firstly, it is noticeable that India and Mongolia abstained from voting in favour of all five resolutions. In particular, India’s refusal to vote in favour drew surprise and criticism both in German diplomatic circles and in the German press, especially because they were openly supported by almost all other democracies in the world. The dominant view in Germany was that India, as the world’s largest democracy, should have been “naturally” supportive. At the same time, India’s stance at the UN was explained primarily by India’s particular material interests, specifically its arms and energy supplies from Russia.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ David Pfeifer, “Narendra Modi. Ein Premier, der Moskaus Kunde ist”, in: *Süddeutsche.de*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/modi-indien-generalversammlung-russland-china-1.5540491>.

Table 3

Voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 2022

Country	Resolution <i>A/RES/ES-11/1, Draft Resolution A/ES-11/L.1 A/ES-11/L.1/Add.1, 2 March 2022</i>	Resolution <i>A/RES/ES-11/2, Draft Resolution A/ES-11/L.2 A/ES-11/L.2/Add.1, 24 March 2022</i>	Resolution <i>A/RES/ES-11/3, Draft Resolution A/ES-11/L.4 A/ES-11/L.4/Add.1, 7 April 2022</i>	Resolution <i>A/RES/ES-11/4, Draft Resolution A/ES-11/L.5, 12 October 2022</i>	Resolution <i>A/RES/ES-11/5, Draft Resolution A/ES-11/L.6, 14 November 2022</i>
Value-based partner					
Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
India	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
Indonesia	Yes	Yes	Abstention	Yes	Yes
Japan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mongolia	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
New Zealand	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Singapore	Yes	Yes	Abstention	Yes	Yes
South Korea	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Germany (for comparison)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Non-value-based partners (control group)					
Bangladesh	Abstention	Yes	Abstention	Yes	Abstention
China	Abstention	Abstention	No	Abstention	No
Fiji	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cambodia	Yes	Yes	Abstention	Yes	Abstention
Malaysia	Yes	Yes	Abstention	Yes	Abstention
Sri Lanka	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
Thailand	Yes	Yes	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
Vietnam	Abstention	Abstention	No	Abstention	Abstention

United Nations (UN) Digital Library, "Voting Data", <https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?cc=Voting+Data&ln=en&c=Voting+Data>.

The voting behaviour of the control group, the non-value-based partners, is also heterogeneous. Although Fiji, Cambodia and Malaysia are not classified as value-based partners, their voting behaviour does not differ fundamentally from that of the value-based partners Indonesia and Singapore. They are even closer to the German position than the value-based partners India and Mongolia. Cambodia, alongside Germany and others, was even one of the initiators of UN Resolution A/RES/ES-11/4. Yet other countries in the control group such as China or Vietnam are, as expected, far removed from Germany's position in their voting behaviour.

Free trade, open economies

In order to reduce German (and European) economic dependence on China, a "free trade initiative" is regularly called for, which "only makes sense transatlantically and in combination with our value-based partners in the [Indo]Pacific", and which should lead to the expansion of trade and investment volumes with "market-economy democracies".⁴¹ A key instrument

⁴¹ German Bundestag, *Stenografischer Bericht*, 66. Sitzung Berlin, 10 November 2022), 7585f, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/20/20066.pdf>.

Table 4

EU free trade agreements with value-based partners and non-value-based partners

<i>Country</i>	<i>Agreement</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>date</i>
Value-based partner			
Australia	EU-Australia Free Trade Agreement	Negotiations suspended in 2023	Since 2018
India	EU-India Free Trade Agreement	In negotiation	Since 2022 (resumption)
Indonesia	EU-Indonesia Free Trade Agreement	In negotiation	Since 2016
Japan	EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement	Ratified	2019
Mongolia	—	—	—
New Zealand	EU-New Zealand Trade Agreement	Signed	2022
Singapore	EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement	Ratified	2019
South Korea	EU-Republic of Korea Free Trade Agreement	Ratified	2015
Non-value-based partners (control group)			
Bangladesh	—	—	—
China	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment	Negotiated but not signed and ratified	2020
Fiji	—	—	—
Cambodia	—	—	—
Malaysia	EU-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement	Negotiations suspended in 2012	Since 2010
Sri Lanka	—	—	—
Thailand	EU-Thailand Free Trade Agreement	In negotiation	Since 2013
Vietnam	EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement	Ratified	2020

Source: European Commission, “Negotiations and Agreements”, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/negotiations-and-agreements_en; idem., “EU Trade by Country/Region”, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions_en; idem., “Free Trade Agreements”, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/free-trade-agreements>.

for this is the conclusion of free trade agreements between the EU and value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific.⁴²

42 Although EU free trade agreements have been a joint task since the Treaty of Lisbon and the respective negotiations are conducted by the European Commission, the mandate for the negotiations is given to the Commission by the member states. The parliaments of the EU member states must also approve the agreements once the negotiations have been finalised. It is therefore extremely unlikely that EU free trade agreements could be negotiated and ratified over Germany’s head Germany – the largest member state with a strongly export-orientated national economy. It is

A relatively homogeneous picture emerges from this group. The list of concluded and planned EU free

therefore assumed here that Germany has agreed to the negotiation and ratification of all EU free trade agreements analysed in this chapter. #In addition, all EU free trade agreements concluded since 2014 have comprehensive sustainability chapters in which the parties undertake, among other things, to comply with the fundamental labour rights enshrined in the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Political framework agreements with human rights and democracy clauses have also previously been concluded with all contracting parties, to which the free trade agreements are in turn linked.

trade agreements with value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific shows that only Mongolia has not yet been targeted for one of these (see Table 4, p. 17). Four value-based partners have already signed or ratified free trade agreements with the EU (Japan, New Zealand,⁴³ Singapore and South Korea), while others are in negotiations (India, Indonesia). However, negotiations with Australia were broken off unsuccessfully in autumn 2023 and have been on hold ever since.

In the control group, only Vietnam and the People's Republic of China have successfully negotiated free trade agreements with the EU – in the case of China, however, ratification has not yet taken place on the European side. Negotiations with Thailand are still ongoing.

Democratic Governance

In the domain of democratic governance, the difference between value-based partners and non-value-based partners is quite clearly recognisable. The overview in Table 5 (p. 19) shows how the value-based partners are categorised in the commonly used democracy indices. Admittedly, these are abstract assessments that appear to provide little concrete information on the actual quality of governance from a democratic perspective. However, these assessments largely coincide with the reports of governmental and non-governmental organisations on the quality of democratic governance in the individual countries. In the Democracy Index, all German value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific are listed as democracies; none of them are categorised as hybrid regimes between democracy and autocracy, or even as authoritarian regimes.

Nevertheless, four value-based partners are classified as “flawed democracies”: India, Indonesia, Mongolia and Singapore. This means that although free and fair elections are held in these countries, there are restrictions on democratic participation with regard to the rights of political opponents or media freedom, for example. This assessment is underpinned by the evaluation of these four countries in the listed freedom indices (Global Freedom Index, Human Freedom Index, press freedom ranking), which hardly differ from the evaluation of non-value-based partners such as Bangladesh or Malaysia.

43 The free trade agreement between the EU and New Zealand is expected to be ratified in 2024.

A look at the control group in turn shows that there is no significant difference in the five selected rankings for Malaysia, Thailand and Sri Lanka when compared to value-based partners such as India or Indonesia. The former, for example, are categorised as “flawed democracies” in the same way as the latter.

There is also a correlation between the categorisation of value-based partners such as India as a “flawed democracy” and the international cooperation of these countries in international democracy promotion. For years, India has been a rather reluctant partner when it comes to regional and global democracy promotion. One of the reasons for this is that under the Modi government, New Delhi has an increasingly ethnically defined understanding of democracy internally,⁴⁴ and externally places a much higher value on other standards such as “state sovereignty” and “non-interference in the internal affairs of other states”.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the issue has so far played a subordinate role in India's bilateral cooperation with Germany.

Rule of law and promotion of the rule of law

The following picture emerges with regard to the positioning of the value-based partners in the indices for the rule of law: Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea are clearly in the top quarter of the rankings (see Table 6, p. 20). This corresponds to the classification of these four value-based partners in the aforementioned democracy indices. This in turn is in line with Berlin's view that the rule of law, especially the protection of a country's citizens from arbitrary coercion is the “foundation” of a functioning democracy.⁴⁶ However, Singapore, classified as a “flawed democracy”, ranks highest in the World Bank's Rule of Law Index.

44 Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India. Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

45 Ian Hall, “Not Promoting, Not Exporting: India's Democracy Assistance,” *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (2017): 81–97; Sandra Destradi, “India as a Democracy Promoter? New Delhi's Involvement in Nepal's Return to Democracy,” *Democratisation* 19, no. 2 (2012): 286–311, doi: 10.1080/13510347.2011.584452.

46 Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, “Rechtsstaatlichkeit”, <https://www.bmz.de/de/themen/rechtsstaatlichkeit>.

Table 5

Ranking of value-based partners and non-value-based partners in democracy and freedom indices, 2021–2022

Country	Democracy Index 2021 (Economist Intelligence Unit)	Democracy Index 2022 (Economist Intelligence Unit)	Global Freedom Index 2022 (Freedom House)	Human Freedom Index 2022 (Fraser Institute)	Press Freedom Index 2022 (Reporters without borders)
Value-based partners					
Australia	8.90, full democracy	8.71, full democracy	95, free	8.51, rank 11	39, satisfactory
India	6.91, flawed democracy	7.04, flawed democracy	66, partly free	6.30, rank 112	150, difficult
Indonesia	6.71, flawed democracy	6.71, flawed democracy	59, partly free	6.74, rank 85	117, difficult
Japan	8.15, full democracy	8.33, full democracy	96, free	8.39, rank 16	71, problematic
Mongolei	6.42, flawed democracy	6.35, flawed democracy	84, free	7.62, rank 51	90, problematic
New Zealand	9.37, full democracy	9.61, full democracy	99, free	8.75, rank 2	11, satisfactory
Singapore	6.23, flawed democracy	6.22, flawed democracy	47, partly free	7.70, rank 44	139, difficult
South Korea	8.16, full democracy	8.03, full democracy	83, free	8.11, rank 30	43, satisfactory
Germany (for comparison)	8.67, full democracy	8.97, full democracy	94, free	8.33, rank 18	16, satisfactory
Non-value-based partners (control group)					
Bangladesh	5.99, hybrid regime	5.99, hybrid regime	39, partly free	5.51, rank 139	162, very serious
China	2.21, authoritarian regime	1.94, authoritarian regime	9, not free	5.22, rank 152	175, very serious
Fiji	5.61, hybrid regime	5.55, hybrid regime	58, partly free	7.28, rank 64	102, problematic
Cambodia	2.90, authoritarian regime	3.18, authoritarian regime	24, not free	6.24, rank 116	142, difficult
Malaysia	7.24, flawed democracy	7.30, flawed democracy	50, partly free	6.78, rank 82	113, difficult
Sri Lanka	6.14, flawed democracy	6.47, flawed democracy	55, partly free	6.33, rank 110	146, difficult
Thailand	6.04, flawed democracy	6.67, flawed democracy	29, not free	6.49, rank 104	115, difficult
Vietnam	2.94, authoritarian regime	2.73, authoritarian regime	19, not free	5.64, rank 132	174, very serious

Sources: The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2021", <https://www.eiu.com/en/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/>; idem, "Democracy Index 2022", <https://www.eiu.com/en/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>; Freedom House, "Global Freedom Scores", <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>; Ian Vásquez et al., *The Human Freedom Index 2022* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute/Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2022), <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/human-freedom-index-2022.pdf>; Reporters without borders, "Press Freedom Index", <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022>.

Table 6

Ranking of value-based partners and non-value-based partners in rule of law indices, 2022

Country	Rule of Law Index 2022 (The World Bank)	WJP Rule of Law Index 2022 (World Justice Project)
Value-based partner		
Australia	1.51, Rank 18	0.79, Rank 13
India	0.11, Rank 83	0.50, Rank 77
Indonesia	-0.19, Rank 102	0.53, Rank 64
Japan	1.56, Rank 15	0.79, Rank 16
Mongolia	-0.19, Rank 103	0.54, Rank 62
New Zealand	1.73, Rank 8	0.83, Rank 7
Singapore	1.78, Rank 3	0.78, Rank 17
South Korea	1.16, Rank 28	0.73, Rank 19
Germany (for comparison)	1.53, Rank 16	0.83, Rank 6
Non-value-based partners (control group)		
Bangladesh	-0.60, Rank 132	0.39, Rank 127
China	-0.04, Rank 87	0.47, Rank 95
Fiji	0.32, Rank 74	—
Cambodia	-0.87, Rank 150	0.31, Rank 139
Malaysia	0.56, Rank 57	0.57, Rank 55
Sri Lanka	-0.06, Rank 88	0.50, Rank 74
Thailand	0.07, Rank 84	0.50, Rank 80
Vietnam	-0.16, Rank 98	0.49, Rank 84

Sources: The World Bank, “Rule of Law Index, 2022”, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb_ruleoflaw/; World Justice Project (WJP), “WJP Rule of Law Index (Overall Score), 2022”, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global>.

India, Indonesia and Mongolia once again stand out with, on average, significantly lower ratings. Moreover, the non-value-based partners Malaysia and Fiji are rated higher than these three value-based partners in terms of the rule of law in the World Bank’s Rule of Law Index. Even China as an autocracy is rated better than Indonesia and Mongolia.

This heterogeneity is also evident in international political practice, for example with regard to membership of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Strengthening international jurisdictions, in particular promoting international criminal tribunals such as the ICC in The Hague, is one of the declared goals of German foreign policy in the area of promoting the

rule of law.⁴⁷ The Rome Statute has been signed and ratified by the value-based partners Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand and South Korea; however, the non-value-based partners Bangladesh, Fiji and Cambodia have also done so. Yet the value-based partners India, Indonesia and Singapore have not signed it.

⁴⁷ The Federal Government, *Ressortgemeinsame Strategie zur Rechtsstaatförderung im Bereich Krisenprävention, Konfliktbewältigung und Friedensförderung* (Berlin, July 2019), 29, <https://peacelab.blog/uploads/190917-rechtsstaatsfoerderung-data.pdf>.

International human rights standards

According to official statements, Germany's foreign policy is not only based on human rights standards, but their application and worldwide implementation is the official goal of German foreign policy. Achieving this serves "German interests". The underlying assumption is that a systematic violation of human rights inhibits peace, stable development and economic prosperity.⁴⁸ In other words: in order to achieve or maintain peace, development and prosperity, the global application of international human rights standards is a prerequisite. It is also – and this is potentially more significant for German foreign policy – a normative frame of reference for Germany's bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other states when it comes to implementing human rights worldwide.

However, if we look at key international human rights agreements and compare signatories amongst value-based partners and non-value-based partners, an extremely heterogeneous picture emerges. The difference between the two groups is minor (see Table 7, p. 22, and Table 8, p. 23). With autocracies like Vietnam and Cambodia, for example, there is more convergence on key international human rights agreements, at least at the international level, than there is with value-based partners such as India and Singapore. And non-value-based partners such as Fiji and Sri Lanka are more similar to Germany at international level in terms of signing and ratifying international human rights agreements than Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand or South Korea, for example.

Of course, this does not speak to the quality of human rights protection in those individual countries. Nor does it say anything about the corresponding international commitment of the countries analysed. Indonesia, for example, as the founder of the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF), is actively committed to upholding democracy and human rights at the BDF as well as at ASEAN level. At the same time, Jakarta does so in a very abstract manner and without concretising these two normative concepts.⁴⁹ Accord-

ing to some observers, this is because Jakarta is more concerned with international prestige than with effectively promoting human rights internationally.⁵⁰ Indonesia's international behaviour in this regard demonstrably lacks coherence,⁵¹ such as, for example, how it votes at the UN Human Rights Council.⁵² For years, its voting behaviour at the UNHRC has been more akin to that of autocracies than democracies.⁵³ Nevertheless, the overview in Tables 7 and 8 provides information on normative convergence at the international level, which in turn is a foundation for inter-governmental cooperation in the area of international human rights policy.

⁴⁸ German missions in Turkey, "Menschenrechte: Fundament deutscher Außenpolitik" (9 December 2022), <https://tuerkei.diplo.de/tr-de/human-rights-acornerstoneofgermany/1050490>.

⁴⁹ Mohamad Rosyidin, "Promoting a Home-Grown Democracy: Indonesia's Approach of Democracy Promotion in the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF)", *Asian Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 3 (2020): 312–33, doi: 10.1080/02185377.2020.1814361.

⁵⁰ Moch Faisal Karim, "Role Conflict and the Limits of State Identity: The Case of Indonesia in Democracy Promotion", *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 3 (2017): 385–404, doi: 10.1080/09512748.2016.1249908.

⁵¹ Anna Grzywacz, "Democracy in Indonesian Strategic Narratives. A New Framework of Coherence Analysis", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2020): 250–69.

⁵² Rizal Sukma, "Do New Democracies Support Democracy? Indonesia Finds a New Voice", *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (2011): 110–23, doi: 10.1353/jod.2011.0057.

⁵³ UN Watch, *UNHRC Scorecard* (Geneva, June 2021).

Table 7

Accession of value-based partners and non-value-based partners to international human rights treaties – Part I

Country	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984
Value-based partners					
Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
India	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Signed, not ratified
Indonesia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Japan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mongolia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
New Zealand	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Singapore	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
South Korea	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Germany (for comparison)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Non-value-based partners (control group)					
Bangladesh	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
China	Yes	Signed, not ratified	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fiji	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cambodia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Malaysia	No	No	No	Yes	No
Sri Lanka	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Thailand	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vietnam	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Status of Ratification. Interactive Dashboard”, <https://indicators.ohchr.org/>.

Table 8

Accession of value-based partners and non-value-based partners to international human rights treaties – Part II

Country	Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, 1990	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2010
Value-based partners				
Australia	Yes	No	Yes	No
India	Yes	No	Yes	Signed, not ratified
Indonesia	Yes	No	Yes	Signed, not ratified
Japan	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Mongolia	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
New Zealand	Yes	No	Yes	No
Singapore	Yes	No	Yes	No
South Korea	Yes	No	Yes	No
Germany (for comparison)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Non-value-based partners (control group)				
Bangladesh	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
China	Yes	No	Yes	No
Fiji	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cambodia	Yes	Signed, not ratified	Yes	Yes
Malaysia	Yes	No	Yes	No
Sri Lanka	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Thailand	Yes	No	Yes	Signed, not ratified
Vietnam	Yes	No	Yes	No

Source: United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Status of Ratification. Interactive Dashboard”, <https://indicators.ohchr.org/>.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has shown that at the political level the importance of value-based partnerships is continually emphasised. The previous and current federal government, the relevant ministries and representatives of government and opposition parties in parliament barely differ in this respect. However, the importance accorded to so-called value-based partners, and Germany's cooperation with them, is not only at odds with the vague, sometimes contradictory concept of "value-based partnership" at the strategic level, but also with regard to its limited significance in relation to the shared normative foundations of international cooperation.

First, this can be seen in the use of the term "value-based partners". It is used for a thoroughly heterogeneous group of states in the Indo-Pacific, all of which can (still) be categorised as democracies, but which differ considerably in terms of the quality of democratic governance. Additionally, democratic developments in some of the states declared as value-based partners have been in clear regression for years. Whereas other states, which have similar parameters in terms of the quality of democratic governance, are not considered value-based partners. Moreover, the lack of coherence in the designation of value-based partners is not only found with regard to clear divergences when it comes to the quality of democratic governance, but also runs across a number of related attributes such as divergences regarding the "protection of human rights", "rule of law" or "free market economy".

Second, analysis of the content of official documents has shown that some of the central attributes that are regularly assigned to value-based partnerships in the Indo-Pacific (above all the protection of the rules-based order) focus less on the internal constitution of the value-based partners and more on their expected international behaviour in the context of massive geopolitical upheavals. By contrast, on the rhetorical level the normative corset of value-based

partnerships is often much narrower, focusing instead on core liberal values. This observable vagueness in the description of the normative framework of value-based partnerships by the political actors themselves demonstrates the ambiguity and contradictory nature of the concept. This finding is reinforced by the fact that the motives and goals for cooperation with value-based partners that go beyond the abstract attribution of "protecting the rule-based order" often do not have a clear value-based (normative) dimension. Instead, reference is made to objectives that are also mentioned in similar formulations in relation to non-value-based partners: for example, the preference for multilateral cooperation, the condemnation of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine as well as support for sanctions against Russia, and finally the preservation of freedom of navigation by emphasising the unrestricted validity of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Third, this analysis has shown that there is no observable correlation between attribution as a value-based partner and closer international cooperation based on shared norms and values with states that are labelled as such. The comparison of value-based partners and a control group of non-value-based partners for the five policy areas considered has produced rather mixed results, such that the assumed correlation between an attribution as a value-based partner and close international cooperation founded on shared norms and values is empirically untenable.

Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the respective partner countries perceive being labelled as a value-based partner as a positive signal with a certain special status. This could give rise to expectations on the side of so-called value-based partners that bilateral cooperation with Germany is to a certain extent assured, or that it guarantees some kind of "preferential treatment". Also, tangible divergences in perspectives and interests between Germany and some value-based partners might initially be concealed behind

the label “value-based partner”. In the long run this could hinder rather than promote cooperation.

Furthermore, it can be assumed that the strong focus on value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific may diminish the attention paid to (potential) cooperation with non-value-based partners in the region. This could be the case when opportunities to cooperate with those countries on the basis of normative convergence exist. More generally, further comparative research on different regions (e.g. Indo-Pacific-Latin, America-Africa) is needed to better understand the use and definition of the term “value-based partner”.

Considering these findings, it seems advisable to fundamentally question usage of the term “value-based partner” as regards the Indo-Pacific. Due to the ambiguity and inconsistency of the concept of a “value-based partnership” and its implementation, it is not advisable to continue using the term in the same way as before. There are at least two options for the recommended amendment. The first option would be a comprehensive sharpening of the concept, to be undertaken at a strategic level, tying it very closely to a coherent liberal normative framework. The result would be a narrower, more restricted use of the term “value-based partner(s)” in practice, and as a result some of Germany’s current value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific would no longer be labelled as such. If therefore in future only Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand retained this status in the region, this would increase norm convergence and with it the coherence of value-based partnerships. On this basis, international cooperation could be closely coordinated with a smaller group of value-based partners in the Indo-Pacific. Pursuing a values-led foreign policy would thus be accomplished by narrowing down this specific form of special relationship.

The second option would be the tacit eradication of an often ambiguous, contradictory term that in its current form has been relatively meaningless in terms of actual cooperation in the region to date. It would therefore have to be quietly removed from the official language concerning the Indo-Pacific. Instead of signalling a special status or a special relationship to selected states by applying the label “value-based partnership”, Germany would make it clear that it is generally prepared to cooperate with all states in the region on an equal footing and according to shared interests. However, this option would create a certain dissonance with the self-imposed goal of pursuing a value-based foreign policy. Yet at the same time,

eradication of the term in favour of a narrative emphasizing pragmatic, interest-driven cooperation with a large number of states, including value-based partners and non-value-based partners alike, would correspond more closely to the observable practice of German foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific.

Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BDF	Bali Democracy Forum
EU	European Union
ICC	International Criminal Court
ILO	International Labour Organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PRC	People’s Republic of China
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
WJP	World Justice Project

