

The United Kingdom and the Indo-Pacific

By Dr. John Nilsson-Wright

Dr. John Nilsson-Wright, Associate Professor at University of Cambridge and Korea Foundation Fellow at Chatham House, explains that "two motives lie behind Britain's increased focus on the Indo-Pacific: a desire to develop a more agile foreign policy post-Brexit; and the need to engage with a region of the world that is increasingly vital to Britain's national interest."

Britain's Indo-Pacific policy, formalized as the government's "Indo-Pacific" tilt, dates from the publication of the government's Integrated Review in 2021. While the UK's foreign policy prioritizes the security of the Euro-Atlantic area, the Indo-Pacific, given its geopolitical and geoeconomic significance, is of critical importance to the United Kingdom (UK). Accordingly, the administration of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak increasingly seeks to establish "closer alignment of purpose and action" between the UK and "like-minded partners" in both regions.

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Reflecting the desire to compensate for the inevitable costs, both material and reputational, of leaving the European Union, the UK has defined its goals in very ambitious terms, aspiring to be the "European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence" in the Indo-Pacific. To this end, the UK has concentrated on using new and old partnerships to enhance its national power. Since leaving the European Union in 2016, whether bilaterally, most notably with Japan; minilaterally, AUKUS is a prime example; or multilaterally, Britain's joining of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the UK has been active in promoting this ambition. The dispatch of the Queen Elizabeth II carrier strike force to the region in 2021, the upgrading of facilities in Singapore and Bahrain, the decision by the UK to become a dialogue partner with ASEAN in 2019, and the appointment of a new UK ambassador to ASEAN are all evidence of this commitment.

Developing a network of multifaceted new relationships with partners, national and institutional, in the region is comparable to the "lattice-work" focus underpinning US engagement in the region as reflected in Washington's October 2022 National Security Strategy. Critically, the UK government echoes the "dual-track" approach of the Biden Administration with its stress on working with democracies and like-minded states, as well as cooperating, where feasible, with geopolitical rivals and international institutions.

Notwithstanding these promising developments, there are potential problems with the UK's approach.

- It is increasingly developing a hard-line "China threat" approach that may be at odds with the more ambivalent Indo-Pacific partners who prefer to "hedge" rather than align against Beijing.
- The UK's policy approach is ad hoc and scatter-gun, and it is hard to discern a strategy that balances means and ends with a clearly defined national focus.
- Contentious post-colonial cultural and historical legacies may complicate the UK's relationship with key states in the region, such as India.
- The UK may lack the military heft to address conventional security threats in the region, and British public opinion may be insufficiently committed to a more high-profile UK role in the region.

Consequently, Britain's role may be best limited to deploying its soft power in science and technology, cyber capacity, diplomacy, and intelligence. In this regard, the UK can build on its developing relationship with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN and explore options for joining new regional bodies such as the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) or in facilitating the promotion of a new Pacific Charter.

Britain's rhetoric regarding its foreign policy aspirations has often sounded over-confident. The UK is committed to "...being both the greatest single European contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area to 2030" and "...deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence." While the scope of this ambition is admirable, it is hard to see how, at a time of slowing economic growth—the UK, according to the IMF, is anticipated to see its economy shrink by 0.3% during 2023—the government can deliver on this bold promise. It is also difficult to see why the UK has a case to be more engaged in the Indo-Pacific than other European actors, most notably France, which has a long history of involvement in the region, particularly given French overseas dependencies and Francophone countries in the Pacific.

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Moreover, as British politics has become more focused on the strategic threat posed by China, there is a danger that the China issue now looms overly large in the characterization of the UK's approach to the Indo-Pacific region. Europe and non-China-related Asia investment flows, as well as trade in services with the UK, eclipse China-related economic ties. However, regarding trade in goods, the importance of China has grown significantly in recent years.

Fear of Chinese aggression over Taiwan raises important questions about the British public's appetite to provide security assistance to democratic partners in the region. While the Sunak administration's commitment in the Integrated Review Refresh to boost defense spending by 2.5% is welcome, the absence of a clear timeline for these increases in defense expenditure has exposed a disturbing lack of clarity in terms of Britain's security priorities.

Key areas that should be the focus of the UK's continued commitment to and engagement with the Indo-Pacific include substantially enhanced defense industry partnerships with Japan. The most notable partnerships are the trilateral fighter plane development project, with Japan and Italy, and the UK-Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement. Similarly, the UK-ROK Bilateral Framework for Closer Cooperation, of June 2022, sets out a wide range of areas for bilateral cooperation, including security, energy and digital partnerships, health care, and development aid. Britain might consider building on these plans by not only realizing its CPTPP membership but also by joining IPEF. More broadly, the UK government's commitment to training and hiring more China specialists, alongside bureaucratic restructuring that has placed India firmly within the Indo-Pacific directorate of Britain's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, are further evidence of the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region across government.

Whether this will be sustainable over the long term, especially with an anticipated change from a Conservative to Labour government by 2025, remains to be seen. More needs to be done to define Britain's approach to the region in strategic terms that genuinely balance means and ends while persuading public opinion at home that this is both affordable and in the national interest.

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