

The U.K.'s Strategic Vision for the Indo-Pacific

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**This paper is a part of a series on Europe's evolving strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific.*

Background: the U.K.'s Indo-Pacific Tilt

A string of events took place in 2021 that have completely redefined Britain's level of strategic ambition and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. On March 16, 2021, the U.K. government published a major policy paper entitled "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy." Commonly referred to as the Integrated Review, it is the most comprehensive review of global British strategic ambition and associated resource alignments in a generation.¹

A major policy priority was to prepare Britain for an era of strategic competition between Western powers and China, and the very first paragraph of the Integrated Review states that "We [the U.K.] must also do more to adapt to major changes in the world around us, including the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region." The Integrated Review set a clear level of ambition in this regard: "By 2030, we will be deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually-beneficial trade, shared security and values."² Given the post-Brexit domestic policy context in which the Integrated Review was compiled, one cannot fail to

¹ Dr. David B. Roberts and Sara Ghazi Almahri, "The U.K.'s Integrated Review and the Gulf States," *The Integrated Review in Context: A Strategy Fit for the 2020s?*, King's College London, Centre for Defence Studies, July 19, 2021, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/the-uks-integrated-review-and-the-gulf-states>. The Integrated Review was considered more "far-reaching in its aims compared to the 1998 Strategic Defence Review and the 2010 and 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) and National Security Strategy (NSS)," the U.K. government's comparable previous papers.

² "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy," U.K. Government, updated July 2, 2021, p. 6, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

note the tone of good-natured competition between Britain and its erstwhile fellow EU member states in these lines.

The Integrated Review named China a “systemic competitor” and wrestled with the conundrum of balancing the U.K.’s trading interests with policies to hedge against China’s economic and military rise as posing threats to regional peace and security. Adopting a middle ground on this, the British identified strategic policy priorities in the Indo-Pacific as contributing to Indo-Pacific security and reaping the economic rewards of the region’s rise. These interlinked motivations for U.K. engagement with regional partner states in the Indo-Pacific include Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Australia, and New Zealand.

The next key event in the Indo-Pacific tilt occurred unexpectedly in the summer of 2021. Events transpired in Afghanistan that accelerated the rebalance of British strategic priorities away from the 9/11 wars to the Indo-Pacific. The decision by the U.S. to wind down its twenty-year military presence in Afghanistan caused a sudden rout of the Afghan National Army by the Taliban. Whereas the U.K.—just like the U.S.—had prepared for a gradual phasing out of its War on Terror commitments, the chaotic evacuation of remaining Western forces from Afghanistan sped up the transition. Defeat in Afghanistan marked a clear end of this era in Western war fighting. Ignominious though it was for the U.S., U.K., and their allies, it also freed them of a burdensome commitment and hastened the refocusing of strategic attention on the Indo-Pacific.

The U.K. heralded this new era later in 2021, when the Royal Navy dispatched the aircraft carrier *HMS Queen Elizabeth II* as part of a carrier strike group on its maiden operational deployment to the Indo-Pacific. On board were F-35B aircraft operated jointly by British and U.S. Marine Corps personnel. The Ministry of Defense advertised the deployment as showcasing “the U.K.’s ability to project global influence and send a powerful message about our ability, and our willingness, to act globally.”³ Visiting partner countries along the way, in early August 2021, *HMS Queen Elizabeth II* transited the Bashi Channel at the southern edge of Taiwan and sailed northward along waters off the eastern Taiwan coast, later docking in Japan. Similar to the U.S.’s naval deployments in the area, the U.K. was demonstrating that the waters around Taiwan were international. A scathing article in China’s English-language *Global Times* fumed that the *HMS Queen Elizabeth II*’s voyage “will not

³ “Defence in a competitive age,” U.K. Government, Ministry of Defence, March 2021, p. 14, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf.

bring the U.K. back to its former imperial glory,”⁴ indicating that China had taken suitable notice of the deployment.

The announcement of AUKUS in September 2021 capped off a major year in U.K. strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS is a tripartite agreement in which the U.K. and U.S. announced a security agreement with Australia to help it build nuclear powered submarines, while enhancing cooperation in cyber security, advanced technology, and other areas. This was especially validating for post-Brexit U.K. foreign policy, which was seeking to deepen its engagement with fellow Commonwealth countries such as Australia. The historical and cultural links between the U.K. and Australia, given the latter's origins as a nineteenth century British settler colony, were deep enough to make this a monumental deal. The Australia nuclear powered submarines would enter service in the 2040s, signifying the sense that the U.K. was in this for the long haul, and that the journey was as important as the destination. AUKUS would sustain defense cooperation and the exchange of military and technical personnel, providing a clear framework for the U.K. and U.S. to engage Australia with one eye on the deterrence of China.

The U.K.'s Imperial Pedigree as a Global Power

Whereas the U.S. always will be an Indo-Pacific power by dint of its Pacific seaboard, the U.K.'s claim to a role in the region resides more in history than in geography. The U.K.'s self-conception as a global power—despite its much smaller resource base than the U.S.—is inspired as much by its conception of living up to the legacies of its historic role as an engaging global imperial maritime trading power.

It is more than a mere historical curiosity that 2021 was the second time the U.K. had been simultaneously embroiled in Afghanistan and the Pacific. Uncannily, between 1839 and 1842, the early Victorians waged two notorious imperial campaigns: the First Anglo-Afghan War unfolded between July 1839 and October 1842; and the First Opium War was fought between September 1839 and August 1842. The former ended in ignominy and slaughter for the British at the hands of their Afghan foes. The latter ended in ignominy for China at the hands of their British foes and has shaped some Chinese attitudes towards Britain ever since.

The historical message this conveys around overstretched global ambition is ominous, but thinking about imperial history also has tangible implications for today. There is a narrative of a “free and

⁴ Wang Qi, “U.K. warship's Taiwan Straits transit 'meaningless display of presence,’” *Global Times*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1235260.shtml>.

open Indo-Pacific” around preserving sovereignty, trade, and competition that Britain regally voices to frame its actions today. However, the Chinese interpretation is that ever since the Opium War, Neo-imperial ambitions have replaced imperial Western ones. The rhetorical tussle that Britain finds itself engaged in with China speaks to their differing interpretations as to why Britain ought to still have an Indo-Pacific role.

One legacy arrangement from the end of the British Empire remains relevant to Indo-Pacific engagement by the U.K. The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) turned fifty in 2021: dating back to the immediate post-colonial period. The FPDA signatories are Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the U.K.; and the FPDA commits these countries to consult and coordinate their response in case of an armed attack on Malaysia or Singapore. The policy context of 1971, when various communist insurgencies were raging in Southeast Asia, has long since changed, but the FPDA has been retained as a useful mechanism for fostering regular defense talks. It is not a collective defense treaty like NATO but offers the U.K. another framework for influence and engagement in the region.⁵ Today, the FPDA, alongside the more significant AUKUS, fits the modern notion of “minilateralism,” in which smaller and selective groups of countries convene and cooperate to meet modern challenges.

How Sustainable is British Indo-Pacific Engagement?

This is clearly no longer the era of *Pax Britannica*. Should Britain still try to be in so many regions at once, making modest contributions in several regional theaters? The U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was rather blunt when answering a question on this topic in late 2021, when asked about allied contributions to the U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific: “As we look to balance our efforts in various parts of the world, we are not only looking to help each other in the Indo-Pacific but we are looking to ensure that we help each other in other parts of the world, as well.” Austin was pleased at the interoperability demonstrated between the U.K. and U.S. militaries from Europe to Asia, and by the “historic” deployment of *HMS Queen Elizabeth II*, but also spoke of scarce resources and asked rhetorically: “If for example, we focus a bit more here [in Asia], are there areas that the U.K. can be more helpful in other parts of the world.”⁶

In the later context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, concerns escalated that the Indo-Pacific tilt of the U.K. and other European countries might have deprived resource and attention

⁵ Euan Graham, “The Five Power Defence Arrangements at 50: what next?,” International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), December 10, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/12/five-power-defence-arrangements>.

⁶ Kathrin Hille, Jasmine Cameron-Chileshe and Demetri Sevastopulo, “Britain ‘more helpful’ closer to home than in Asia, says U.S. defence chief,” *Financial Times*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/7fb26630-a96a-4dfd-935c-9a7acb074304>.

better spent on European defense. Indeed, no matter how important a theater the Indo-Pacific has become, the urgent need was to respond to Europe's most serious interstate war since 1945. As the U.K. rose to the challenge of backing Ukraine's embattled armed forces, government, and people with diplomatic and military support, would the U.K. also still be able to deliver its defense contributions in the Indo-Pacific?

Next Steps: Sustaining U.K. Indo-Pacific Engagement

In 2022, the U.K. announced that it would deploy a "persistent presence" consisting of two Royal Navy offshore patrol vessels in the Indo-Pacific, with a Littoral Response Group to follow in 2023 which would include an amphibious assault ship and a frigate or a destroyer. Making use of the logistical support available in Brunei, Diego Garcia, and Singapore, these deployments would form the mainstay of the U.K.'s naval commitment to the region, allowing it to mount regular naval patrols.

Rather than by sending naval assets alone, the U.K. also would sustain its commitment through defense industrial cooperation. This plays to U.K. strengths since according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the U.K. was the seventh largest armaments and weapons exporter between 2017-2021 with 2.9 percent of the global market share—a tiny amount compared to the U.S.'s 39 percent, but significant due to the U.K.'s respected defense companies and associated research and development organizations.

Following AUKUS, in December 2022, the U.K. announced another tripartite defense project, this time with Italy and Japan, to jointly develop a sixth-generation fighter aircraft known as Tempest. U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak signed an MOU with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to cement the deal, in line with Japan stepping up its own defense ambitions under the shadow of the return of major interstate war in Europe and tensions in East Asia, notably around the flash points of Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and rising Chinese and Russian naval cooperation in the region.

The Tempest jet will enter service in the late 2030s, and with the AUKUS submarines set to arrive in the 2040s, these arrangements allow the U.K. to sustain its engineering and military involvement with key regional partners for the long haul, which also provides a framework for other kinds of cooperation, whether intelligence or diplomatic, that focuses minds and collective efforts around deterring possible Chinese military aggression in Taiwan.

The elusive catch for enhanced defense and trading ties remains India, a country that Britain has a complex relationship with given the Raj, Partition, and the non-alignment path of Cold War-era independent India. A defense cooperative relationship between Britain and India remains deeply sought after by London. But, as India's ambivalent stance regarding Russia has reminded many, India still values its defense and diplomatic ties to Russia. Despite its membership in the QUAD and rivalry with China, India remains resistant to following Western leadership and accepting autocracy versus democracy framings of Asian regional dynamics.

Conclusion

The U.K.'s self-conception is as a foreign policy power with modest resources and historically rooted global interests. In the Indo-Pacific, the U.K. aims to be a nimble contributor to regional security. The U.K. would clearly prefer that there is no flare-up of war in the Indo-Pacific—and to have contributed to this outcome—not least because it would be very bad for business in what is an economically thriving part of the world. The British would prefer to make money and not war; but for now, British efforts to bolster regional defense also feed positively into the British defense industry with good long-term growth prospects.

National self-interest is driving this engagement, just as it would for any country. It is not just concern for peace in the region for its own sake, but a British need to anchor its foreign and trade policies more globally following its departure from the EU. Adding further momentum, the U.K. has applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), as growing its regional trade remains a British priority.

In the Integrated Review, among twelve stated global policy objectives for the conduct of the U.K.'s foreign and defense outlook, one is dedicated to the Indo-Pacific: “we [the U.K.] will pursue deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific in support of shared prosperity and regional stability, with stronger diplomatic and trading ties. This approach recognizes the importance of powers in the region such as China, India, and Japan and also extends to others including South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. We will seek closer relations through existing institutions such as ASEAN and seek accession to the CPTPP.” It now remains to be seen which countries the U.K. achieves the greatest traction with its engagement.

Given the sudden seismic development of the war in Ukraine, the Integrated Review already is being refreshed since its publication. The original Integrated Review also was published on the U.K.

government website in multiple languages other than English and Welsh (in French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, and Chinese). Clearly, His Majesty's Government intended the document to be read by both allies and adversaries—including by the Chinese. Whether the revised Integrated Review strengthens its language around China remains to be seen, but it is clear already that Britain has articulated successfully its policy aims for the Indo-Pacific and is well underway in its implementation of this renewed engagement.

Dr. Puri wrote in his personal capacity. The views and interpretations expressed by the author are solely his own.



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