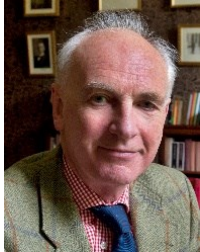


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Global Britain's Tilt to the Indo-Pacific



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*On 16 March the UK government published an integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. A Ministry of Defence command paper, *Defence in a competitive age*, was presented to Parliament a few days later. What follows is an extract from a review of these papers which appeared in the *British Academy's Journal* on 22 June, by kind permission of the author and the Academy.*

Neither of the National Security Strategies of 2010 or of 2015 was explicit about the identity of its adversaries. The Integrated Review is. Global Britain names Russia as 'the most acute direct threat to the UK' and describes China 'as a systemic competitor'. The distinction in the wording is important.

Much has been made of the review's 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific', as though what was promised was a reversal of the decision taken by the Labour government in 1968 to withdraw from east of Suez. In truth Britain never fully left, thanks in part to Gurkha recruitment in Nepal and training in Brunei, and it returned in force when it invaded Iraq and Afghanistan. The reliance of its oil supply and maritime trade on freedom of navigation in the Gulf and Indian Ocean has given it a persistent interest in those waters, made evident by its establishment of naval bases in Bahrain in 2014 and Oman in 2019, its retention of Diego Garcia (which was essential for its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan), and the creation of a defence staff in Singapore.

What is new is the extension of these defence interests into the world's largest ocean, the Pacific. While recognising Britain's existing commitment to what it calls the 'Euro-Atlantic' region, the Integrated Review gives Britain a strategy which is more explicitly global certainly than that of China and arguably even of the United States. There may be a danger of exaggeration here. The wording of Global Britain on China breaks less definitively with David Cameron's pursuit of China as a commercial and economic partner than human rights concerns over Uighurs or protests over Hong Kong might suggest. What worries Global Britain is that 'the momentum for trade

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liberalisation may continue to slow and cases of protectionism increase, driven by political and economic conditions within states and an increasingly aggressive use of economic and trade policy as a lever in competition between states'. Seemingly oblivious to the ironies implicit in Britain's own withdrawal from one free-trading community, it argues that 'open, trading economies like the UK will need to engage with China and remain open to Chinese trade and investment, but they must also protect themselves against practices that have an adverse effect on prosperity and security'. China, in other words, is presented as both an economic competitor and a trading partner, but not as a military threat.

However indirect its choice of words, Global Britain seems to accept that it cannot have it both ways – and that is true not just of China, but also of those it seeks as regional allies, whose proximity to an increasingly assertive hegemon makes them wary of overtly hostile posturing, not least by those who might wish to present themselves as allies, like Britain.

Defence in a competitive age sees China differently. It treats China, as well as Russia, as a military competitor. Presenting China's rise as 'by far the most significant geopolitical factor in the world today', it identifies its navy as the world's largest and warns that in the air it will soon have 'a full spectrum' of capabilities. China's military modernisation is, it says, 'proceeding faster than any other nation' and its behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region is 'increasingly assertive'.

Led by the Royal Navy, this militarisation of Anglo-Chinese relations has been under way for some time, albeit with surprisingly little challenge or debate. In February 2019 Gavin Williamson said that HMS Queen Elizabeth, the first of the aircraft carriers, would be deployed to the South China Sea. The Prime Minister's foreword to the Integrated Review, which confirmed that the carrier strike group would pass through the Mediterranean and on to the Indo-Pacific in 2021, was less explicit. Defence in a competitive age, by advertising the carrier strike group's integration with the US Navy and US Marine Corps, implied a British readiness to support the United States within what China calls 'the first island chain'.

All four of Britain's 'five-eyes' intelligence-sharing partners are Pacific powers. For some time, three of them, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, have been balancing their defence relationships with the fifth, the US, with their economic interests. As they have cleaved to America for security, they have turned to China for trade. Other Pacific powers located closer to Asia's mainland, from Singapore through to the Philippines and then Japan, have been behaving similarly. China's assertiveness and, in particular, its explicit claim to Taiwan have made this balancing act increasingly hard to sustain. The United States has responded by imposing a form of deterrence in the western Pacific which relies on very rapid escalation in order to manage a crisis which could emerge at any moment.

Talk of a renewed Cold War in Europe misses the point in relation to east Asia: here, as the Demilitarized Zone in Korea testifies, the Cold War never ended. Peace has not been fully established and its maintenance rests on a hair-trigger. Those dangers, coupled with economic imperatives, mean that the rising tensions are in turn causing rifts among the democratic powers. New Zealand has refused to bow to US pressure to see 'the five-eyes partnership' as a military

alliance in embryo; its ANZAC partner, Australia, has gone the other way, proving ready to jeopardise its trade with China in pursuit of increasingly robust conventional deterrence. Despite its physical distance, Britain has advertised its desire to be part of a Pacific alliance. The Prime Minister floated the idea of a NATO for the Pacific and the Defence Command Paper calls on NATO to respond to the 'systemic threat' posed by China. It also mentions bilateral relations with South Korea and the plan to create a defence staff in Canberra. Recent press articles have floated possible British alliances with Japan and even with Taiwan, although the latter is not even a formal ally of the United States. The carrier strike group therefore bears a heavy burden of foreign policy expectation. It signals to the United States that Britain is ready to support it in the Pacific just as Britain assumes that the US will honour its maritime obligations in the 'Euro-Atlantic'.

The facts, that in military terms the carrier strike group makes only a marginal difference to the naval balance in the western Pacific and that its presence would probably hamper the escalatory mechanics of US deterrence in the event of a crisis, seem to be less important than the attractions of the carrier group's capacity for 'influence' with regional allies and other democratic powers. The United States would probably prefer the United Kingdom to 'back-fill' in areas closer to home, in order to offset the overstretch to which even the US is subject. That would cut the Royal Navy's carbon emissions and the massive fuel costs incurred by such deployments. The Integrated Review is silent on how frequent they will be. Defence in a competitive age asserts that the carrier strike group is 'permanently [emphasis added] available to NATO, an embodiment of an unwavering commitment to the defence and deterrence of the Euro-Atlantic area'. That statement is immediately contradicted in the following sentence, which describes the carrier strike group's deployment to the Indo-Pacific.

All the eye-catching attention devoted to the carriers neglects the fact that they are accompanied by frigates, destroyers and other assets regularly and routinely required in the 'Euro-Atlantic'. They have to be present to be effective, whether the purpose is to defend or to deter, and they cannot be in two different oceans at the same time. This is 'gesture strategy'. It is also deeply dangerous, giving mixed messages to allies and adversaries alike, and risking war by accident and inadvertence.

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