

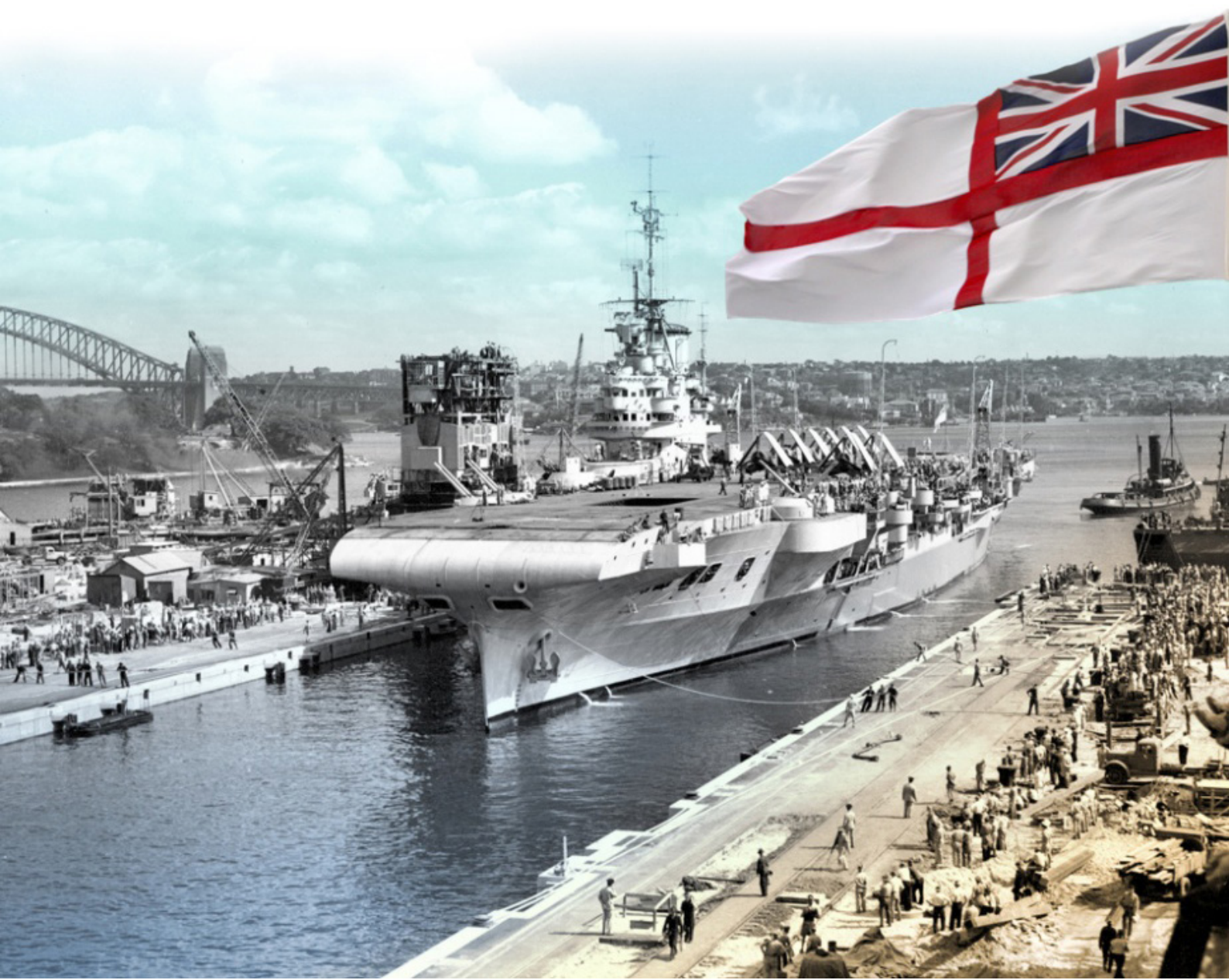
Days of Future Past?

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British strategy and the shaping of
Indo-Pacific security

Dr Alessio Patalano

Foreword by Sir Michael Fallon MP



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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the King's Japan Programme to the research for this paper and express his gratitude to all those professionals from across three continents who have volunteered their precious time to challenge views and sharpen ideas

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Published by
Policy Exchange, 8 - 10 Great George Street, Westminster, London SW1P 3AE

www.policyexchange.org.uk

ISBN: 978-1-910812-67-9

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Foreword

by Sir Michael Fallon MP

It was one of my most distinguished predecessors, the late Lord Carrington whose service to the nation we celebrated earlier this year, who had the unenviable task of implementing Britain's withdrawal from east of Suez and the Pacific, a decision he inherited from a bankrupt Labour Government in the late 1960s. Our friends in the Gulf were aghast; valuable bases in South Africa and Singapore were given away; and our Navy confined itself thereafter to the Atlantic and Mediterranean seas.

Now the fastest-growing region of the world demands our attention again. Instability on the Korean peninsula, tension over Taiwan, the competing claims in the South China Sea, and the increase in defence spending by countries such as India and Australia, all point to the need for us to contribute to the security of trading routes on which we now depend much more heavily. The French never left: is it not time, Dr Patalano asks in this excellent historical survey, that Britain, the world's fifth or sixth largest military power, returned?

In reality, Britain never entirely withdrew. We continued to exercise and train with our Gulf friends; we maintained a garrison in Brunei; we kept up the Five Powers Defence Arrangement. My predecessor Philip Hammond commenced negotiations for a new base in Bahrain; I concluded the first agreements on the use of Port Duqm on the Indian Ocean; and the 2015 SDSR identified Australia and Japan as key partners for closer alliances, leading to joint exercises and industrial co-operation on new frigates and missiles.

Now my successor wants to restore bases further east and to deploy our new carriers into contested waters. That should come with three obvious caveats. First, permanent bases cost significant money and will require a further uplift in the overall defence budget. Second, the Royal Navy can no longer operate on its own: freedom of navigation operations, the deployment of the carriers, overflights and exercising all need us to work in tandem with allied navies and air forces and to reflect their differing priorities. Third, any such strategic positioning needs to be properly thought through, right across government, to ensure that our security, military and trading interests are properly aligned.

Sir Michael Fallon MP was Secretary of State for Defence, 2014–2017

Executive Summary

The Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has announced the government's intention to open a base in East Asia as part of a more active Indo-Pacific strategy. This paper explains why this is a good idea. It explores how this could be the Secretary's signature legacy – the beginning of a doctrine marking the UK's return East of Suez with a strategy aimed at shaping the regional security environment. Such a strategy would support key UK interests, reassuring allies and engaging with competitors. It would also enhance the UK's profile as a global actor and favour the development of security and economic ties with a regular, visible presence.

The paper draws upon a historical analysis of the mid-1960s review on overseas defence policy to formulate the following policy recommendations:

- The UK should develop an Indo-Pacific strategy focused on shaping the regional security environment;
- Such a strategy would require a forward presence in the region – with a base in Australia and access agreements to bases in Japan;
- The composition of the presence should be centred on a flexible, scalable, and sustainable force, drawing upon a core of maritime capabilities;
- The forward deployed force should be centred on an amphibious ship which would be able of covering a wide array of missions, from disaster relief to ensuring freedom of navigation, to be performed alone and with partners, at manageable costs;
- Such a presence should not be seen as a stand-alone set of capabilities; rather it should become the centrepiece of a regionally based set of tailor-made working partnerships with allies;
- Such a presence should be used to conduct a wide array of missions from capacity building and disaster relief to counter-coercion and conventional deterrence;
- The UK's forward presence should aim at a fully-fledged defence engagement portfolio of activities working in tandem with foreign policy objectives – with interactions with all regional actors;
- Such a forward presence should specifically aim at enhancing operational ties with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea - in addition to the United States - as well as act as an opportunity for other European actors to engage in regional stability.

Introduction

On Monday 11 February, the Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson, made a major speech at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on the role of defence in 'Global Britain'. The media coverage of the event focused on critiques of Williamson's articulation of the role of new technologies in future defence posture and the lack of depth in national capabilities.¹ Yet, such criticisms missed out the more significant point on the policy aims of Britain's future defence posture and their contribution to redefine the UK's international security profile. Indeed, Williamson's speech was remarkable because for the first time it gave voice to an ambition to shift away from the present strategic posture of 'managing' and 'reacting' to international events in support of allies, international order, and economic interests.

Williamson's speech was planting the seeds for a more active posture designed to shape international security with a particular emphasis to the Indo-Pacific region. In a fractured international environment and a divided public opinion over the priorities of national security, it is no wonder that most pundits reacted to the speech with a critical voice. Notwithstanding, one key point stressed in Williamson's speech concerned the need for the UK to strengthen its 'global presence'. In particular, he talked about how to achieve that by means of forward basing arrangements for future capabilities in places like the Indo-Pacific and stronger political statements such as the potential deployment of the UK's new aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, to challenge Chinese activities in the region. This last point proved controversial even within the government, prompting the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, to dismiss the possibility as 'entirely premature'.²

Debating the question of the UK's future presence and contribution to security in the Indo-Pacific is all but a premature affair. In response to Williamson's speech, Chinese Vice-Premier Hu Chunhua announced that he was cancelling scheduled talks on future trading relations with the Chancellor, Philip Hammond. The Chinese announcement was not entirely unexpected in that it sits within an established pattern of behaviour. Yet, the episode – and the Chancellor's comments on Williamson's speech in its aftermath – offered a reminder of the crucial importance to examine the challenges of the UK assuming a more proactive role in the region. In Williamson's vision, a desire to engage more widely in the Indo-Pacific is within the grasp of the UK's capabilities, but returning 'East of Suez' in the post-Brexit era will present a sea of opportunities in oceans that are not without growing security challenges. At such times of strategic uncertainty, history can provide a useful guide. This paper examines the role of the Indo-Pacific in UK grand strategy in the past. It looks at a major

1. David Bond, George Parker, 'UK to Convert Ferries into Royal Marine Strike Ships', FT, 11 February 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/4ee70c9a-2df6-11e9-ba00-0251022932c8>; Kim Sengupta, 'Williamson's Military Manoeuvres Can't Make Up for Britain's Weak Hand Post-Brexit', The Independent, 11 February 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/gavin-williamson-defence-china-brex-it-queen-elizabeth-china-uk-a8774391.html>; Lucy Fisher, Francis Elliott, 'Gavin Williamson Defiant on Risk from China', The Times, 18 February 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/williamson-defiant-on-risk-from-china-hldtp35hq>; Simon Jenkins, 'British "Lethality"? Gavin Williamson's Brain Has Gone Absent Without Leave', The Guardian, 11 Monday 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/11/gavin-williamson-defence-policy-uk>; Oscar Rickett, 'You Get the Heroes you Deserve. And Brexit Britain has Gavin Williamson', The Guardian, 18 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2019/feb/18/brexit-britain-gavin-williamson>.
2. Alistair Bunkall, 'UK-China Row: Philip Hammond Undermines Gavin Williamson's Warship Carrier Plans', Sky News, 21 February 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/uk-china-row-philip-hammond-undermines-gavin-williamsons-warship-carrier-plans-11643584>.

policy review of 1965 on the UK role 'east of Suez' and seeks to draw lessons from it for today.

The Changing Meaning of Being 'Back to the East of Suez'

Reference to the Indo-Pacific is part of a policy process in which the UK government has reconsidered over the last decade the meaning of being back 'East of Suez'. In Spring 2013, informed observers noted how the government led by Prime Minister David Cameron had signalled its intention to enhance the UK's strategic presence east of the Suez canal.³ This represented the first clear indication of a policy shift from Prime Minister Wilson's choice to withdraw from East of Suez in 1968, notwithstanding the fact that Britain never fully relinquished her naval presence in the Gulf area.⁴ The then Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards, gave further substance to this view as he expected the British joint expeditionary force (JEF) – the spearhead of the UK's future military power projection capability – to generate 'global effect and influence' in the Middle East and the Gulf where some of its elements were 'to spend more time reassuring and deterring'.⁵

Four years later, the government's plans were turning into reality. As former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson pointed out – in Bahrain no less – Britain was back in the Gulf.⁶ Crucially though, the policy context around Johnson's announcement suggested an even greater shift in ambitions. Being back east of Suez had a different meaning, suggesting an intention to expand the reach of British policy action farther east.⁷ The Gulf was no longer the main operational focus of an east of Suez British posture. As Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has suggested on several occasions, Britain was pacing options for its projection capabilities to play an active security role in the wider Indo-Pacific region.⁸ The Gulf area had become the launching pad for such action. Renewed defence engagements in East Asia from Australia to Singapore and Japan, as much as the forward deployment of a Royal Navy frigate in Bahrain were indicative of the direction of such a widened aspiration.⁹

In less than a decade, therefore, consecutive British governments have significantly expanded the geographic scope of their ambitions and proposed to fundamentally alter how the country's military power would be employed. Engagement with the Indo-Pacific implies in fact a different posture from the land-centric military balance needed to conduct insurgency operations. It requires a proactive behaviour underwritten by a strong maritime expeditionary core of capabilities 'to shore up the global system of rules and standards' aimed at defending allies and supporting partners against revisionist state actors.¹⁰ These are fundamental changes that raise

3. Gareth Stanfield and Saul Kelly, 'A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment in the Gulf', *Briefing Paper*, April 2013, 2-3.
4. Geoffrey Till, 'Brexit & Southeast Asia: Return of British Naval Presence?', *RSIS Commentary*, 07 February 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CO19019.pdf>.
5. General Sir David Richards, 'Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture', *Royal United Services Institute*, 17 December 2012, <https://rusi.org/event/annual-chief-defence-staff-lecture-and-rusi-christmas-party-2012>.
6. Boris Johnson, 'Britain is Back East of Suez', *Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, 09 December 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-speech-britain-is-back-east-of-suez>. Stanfield and Kelly, 'A Return to East of Suez?', *op. cit.*, 4.
7. Euan Graham, 'Is Boris Johnson Steaming to the South China Sea? If so, Only Slowly', *War on the Rocks*, 04 August 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/is-boris-johnson-steaming-to-the-south-china-sea-if-so-only-slowly/>.
8. Christopher Hope, 'Britain to Become "True Global Player" post-Brexit with Military Bases in South East Asia and Caribbean, Says Defence Secretary', *The Telegraph*, 30 December 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/12/29/britain-become-true-global-player-post-brexit-new-military-bases/>; Gavin Williamson, 'Defence in Global Britain', *RUSI*, 11 February 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-in-global-britain>.
9. Jeevan Vasagar, 'Britain Revives Military Engagement East of Suez', *Financial Times*, 23 December 2016; Ben Doherty, 'Britain's New Aircraft Carriers to Test Beijing in South China Sea', *The Guardian*, 27 July 2017; Dominic Nicholls, 'Britain to Send Frigate to the Gulf in Most Serious Naval Deployment since 1971', *The Telegraph*, 25 May 2018.
10. Williamson, 'Defence in Global Britain', *op.cit.*

important questions. What is the significance of the Indo-Pacific region to British strategy? Will current plans for future capabilities be able to sustain political ambitions? Crucially, what will be the required level of military commitment for the UK to be regarded as a 'global' player in the region?

The above questions are relevant for two key reasons. First, from 2013 to 2017, a period of increased tension in the wider Indo-Pacific region, British military power – especially its naval presence – has been notable

Recent actions highlight the deeper problem of sustaining a military presence over an extended geographic area for longer periods at acceptable costs

by its absence. Recent deployments of major surface combatants in the East and South China Seas have done much to address prior absence by showcasing the UK's support to regional maritime order and allies

alike.¹¹ Yet, recent actions highlight also the deeper problem of sustaining a military presence over such an extended geographic area for longer periods of time at acceptable costs.¹² They also reasonably increase expectations within the region about the credibility of the UK's contributions to regional security. Second, the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific in world affairs is well appreciated across the UK government.¹³ However, it remains unclear how the UK relates to the alternative strategic visions for regional order and stability in the Indo-Pacific region emerging from China, Japan, and the United States.¹⁴ In particular, as the UK nears the exit from the European Union, this issue is intertwined with the meaning of a 'Global' Britain in security terms.

In engaging with the above questions, this paper argues that this is not the first time that the Indo-Pacific region has been central to the debate over the redefinition of British strategy. Indeed, the paper looks back at the complex process to re-examine the boundaries of British foreign and military policy that took place in the mid-1960s to explore the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific to British strategy. The paper focuses on the documents related to the working committee on overseas defence policy – the first modern context within which an Indo-Pacific strategy is debated – to review the three main ways in which the Indo-Pacific has mattered to British strategy.¹⁵ In 1965-66, the UK was reviewing its overseas defence posture on the basis of reduced defence spending and the need to prioritise requirements.¹⁶ Similarly to today, the Indo-Pacific represented a region in which the redefinition of British posture spoke to a changing 'global' – predominantly post-imperial – role. Similarly to today, the limits of a 'new role' were set by the expected future capabilities that were to underwrite it. Upon this analysis, the paper will offer some final suggestions as to what is politically and militarily required for current British ambitions in the Indo-Pacific to turn into a strategic reality.

11. Admiral Sir Philip Jones, First Sea Lord, 'Speech at DSEI Maritime Conference 2017', 11 September 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/dsei-maritime-conference-2017>.
12. Rachel Dodd, 'Royal Navy Warship HMS Argyll Pulled in for Maintenance Work in Singapore', *Plymouth Herald*, 17 November 2018; <https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/plymouth-news/royal-navy-warship-hms-argyll-2231949>.
13. Admiral Jones, 'Speech at DSEI Maritime Conference 2017', op. cit.
14. For a recent articulation of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, cf. Xi Jinping, 'Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum', 15 May 2017, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1465819.shtml; on Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, see Shinzo Abe, 'Address at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly', 25 September 2018, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/unp_a/page3e_000926.html; for the United States' version of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, see Mike Pompeo, 'Remarks on America's Indo-Pacific Economic Vision' 30 July 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/07/284722.htm>.
15. The role of the Committee in the East of Suez review process was first mentioned in Jeffrey Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* (London: MacMillan Press, 1988), 158. On the significance of applied history as a method of analysis, see Robert Crowford, 'The Case for Applied History: Can the Study of the Past Really Help Us to Understand the Present?', *History Today*, Vol. 68, No. 9, September 2018.
16. Saki R. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Edward Longinotti, 'Britain Withdrawal from East of Suez: From Economic Determinism to Political Choice', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2015, 318-340.

The Indo-Pacific: Strategic Imperative or Desirable Geopolitical Space?

In autumn 1965 a review study on ‘Indo-Pacific strategy’ was completed and circulated for comments from senior government officials.¹⁷ In the study, preserving a military presence in the Indo-Pacific was not regarded as a strategic imperative. Yet, the prospect of a withdrawal of British forces after the end of the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation (hereby ‘the confrontation’) was regarded as not without ‘serious damage of British interests’.¹⁸ These interests, whilst at heart including a series of treaty obligations – notably in the context of SEATO,¹⁹ were at heart of a geopolitical nature and revolved around the following issues: the management of trans-Atlantic relations, the support to allies, and the obligations unfolding from treaty commitments and territorial dependencies.²⁰

For the FCO, which had led the drafting efforts, the Indo-Pacific played a central role in empowering Britain with the ability to ‘matter’ to the United States. Britain’s relationship with the United States represented a key factor in defining the need for a military presence in the region. In particular, British officials recognised London’s ‘heavy’ dependence on Washington for the ‘success’ of the country’s overall overseas military policy. The United States, conversely, linked British support in the Indo-Pacific as a ‘quid pro quo’ for help elsewhere.²¹ This was a consideration that the British government could not ignore if it wished to maintain worldwide cooperation with the United States as well as a degree of influence inside the beltway.²² For Britain, the Indo-Pacific was a place in which the country’s residual post-colonial connections and influence represented a strategic asset in Washington’s overall Cold War efforts to contain Communism. Supporting the American order would buy Britain relevance and leadership by association.

Considerations regarding the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific in managing the partnership with the United States differed from those informing ties with Australia, New Zealand, and overseas territories – which at the time included Hong Kong, and islands in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. From this perspective, a regional military presence was a matter of supporting allies whilst avoiding betraying expectations concerning a British commitment to their security. This seemed to be particularly the case of Australia and New Zealand. In both countries, officials were under no illusion that they could depend on the UK for their

17. The review under the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee was completed in late March 1967. Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez*, op. cit., 158.

18. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, ‘Defence Review Studies: Indo-Pacific Strategy’, CAB 148/44, 06 October 1965, 9; and ‘Defence Review Studies: Indo-Pacific Strategy’, CAB 148/44, 20 October 1965, 10.

19. On military implications of treaty commitments to SEATO, see UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, ‘South East Asia and the Far East’, CAB 148/44, 05 May 1965, 5.

20. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’, CAB 148/44, 20 October 1965, op. cit., 10.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.

22. *Ibid.*, 2.

security. They did not ‘need’ British military aid. They nonetheless nurtured an expectation on British defence contributions to manage security crises in the Indo-Pacific, one ‘bound by strong ties of kinship and sentiment’.²³

Colonial territories, on the other hand, were considered as either impossible to defend – as it was assumed in the case of Hong Kong under a Chinese attack – or far away from any direct military danger.²⁴ Thus, especially in relation to the Pacific and Indian Ocean territories, the main requirement for British forces was considered to encompass basic local defence and contributions to internal stability.²⁵ Outside these territories, what remained unclear was the level of commitment that would be needed in Malaysia and Singapore in case bases in these places were to be kept after 1970.²⁶ One key issue raised by the FCO since the beginning of the process was the loss of British influence in pro-western countries in the region and their policies.²⁷

Surprisingly, military requirements were not directly related to the protection of specific economic interests. In the region, British strategic calculus was not informed by business considerations. As the study clearly pointed out, Australia, New Zealand, India, Malaysia, Japan, and Hong Kong were all important trading partners for the UK. Indeed, Australia and New Zealand were also major centres of British investment. It was therefore fair to assume that the nature of economic interests would likely affect the extent of British defence assistance in case of a request from any of the above partners. Yet the report observed that:

*‘(O)ur military presence as such is strictly irrelevant to the maintenance of these economic interests. The countries which trade with us do so because it suits their commercial interests to do so’.*²⁸

A matter of greater consideration from a long-term economic perspective pertained to the less immediate link between security, economic prosperity, and sustained regional stability. The Indo-Pacific had great human and economic potential but the assumption was that no measure of British military power alone would be able to prevent the advance of communist forces. On the other hand, officials were convinced that flourishing trade relations rested on a stable regional environment that allowed for the safety and security of the maritime arteries that carried the bulk of goods at its heart. Since stability would inevitably falter if ‘neither we nor any friendly power maintained a military presence in the area fulfilling the role of “international policeman”’, military power was needed to sustain the conditions underwriting it.²⁹ Thus, whilst a British military presence was not strictly needed to directly defend regional actors, it was nonetheless desirable as a source to future stability.

Communism challenged the stability of an American-led regional order. More specifically, Britain’s ‘crucial interest’ in the Indo-Pacific was to ensure the containment of China to ‘prevent Eastern and Southern Asia from falling under Chinese Communist domination’.³⁰ Within this Cold War framework, a British military presence was clearly linked to the country’s long-term objectives. These were not merely to contain Chinese

23. *Ibid.*, 3.

24. *Ibid.*, 7.

25. *Ibid.*, 7, 9.

26. *Ibid.*, 6-7.

27. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, ‘South East Asia – Memorandum by the Foreign Office’, CAB 148/52, 21 April 1965.

28. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’, CAB 148/44, 20 October 1965, *op. cit.*, 3.

29. *Ibid.*, 3.

30. *Ibid.*, 2. Emphasis on the ‘Chinese military threat’ increased in 1966 with requests for an updated assessment prepared by the Joint Intelligence Committee. Cf. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, ‘Future Indo-Pacific Policy’, CAB 148/53, 23 March 1966, 2.

communism, or indeed to react to its possible ambitions. Britain's key aims rested in the ability of 'shaping' the regional security environment. The ultimate goal was the consolidation of a 'neutralised "belt" in Eastern and Southeastern Asia' free of Chinese military presence.³¹ Such a buffer to Chinese communism would 'be informed by local nationalisms, and underwritten by 'a Western military presence in the background as a counter-weight to Chinese military strength'.³²

By spring of the following year, the bulk of British strategy as defined in the original draft study had not changed. However, senior officials had agreed that discussions on long-term objectives on a neutralised belt would be met with a degree of opposition in Washington and Canberra and decided to focus more on articulating their appreciation of the Chinese threat.³³ The debate over the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific for Britain was focusing more on matters of assisting the United States in the Cold War, especially as the prospect for a sustainable military presence in the region diminished. As priorities changed, senior officials also agreed that more robust discussions on quadripartite cooperation with the United States, Australia, and New Zealand were needed. The sense of inevitability of withdrawal of forces east of Suez after 1970 had forced a choice to prioritise support to allies and reduction of obligations over a wider role to shape and regional sustain security.³⁴

Britain's key aims rested in the ability of 'shaping' the regional security environment

31. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, 'Indo-Pacific Strategy', CAB 148/44, 20 October 1965, op. cit., 2.

32. *Ibid.*, 2.

33. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, 'Minutes of a Meeting of the Working Party', CAB 148/53, 23 March 1966, 1.

34. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, 'Minutes of a Meeting of the Working Party', CAB 148/53, 31 March 1966, 1-2.

A Strategy for a Reduced Military Role: Siding with Allies to Maximum Effect?

Indeed, the sense of inevitability that was consolidating in 1966 was built on the increasing constraints on future defence budgets. In particular, pressure for keeping costs down undermined the economic viability to retain bases and forces in the Indo-Pacific. The key to designing a military presence in the Indo-Pacific rested on the need to clarify the political reasons for its being.³⁵ In 1965 though the issue was still very much debated in terms of how future reductions in military presence would affect the political utility of a British strategy in the Indo-Pacific. If a British military presence was not strictly needed but still desirable, where did that leave the issue of military posture and capabilities in the Indo-Pacific?

The MoD had been tasked to provide an answer in a study that rested heavily on, and was deeply informed by, the wider defence reviews of 1965 and 1966.³⁶ Initial studies were conducted taking into consideration two configurations, the ability of the UK to operate independently, or in coalition, against two types of scenarios, internal security interventions and limited wars.³⁷ One crucial underlying assumption was that after 1970 the UK would have lacked bases in Southeast Asia.³⁸ This was not a trifling affair since the absence of overseas garrisons and stockpiles would significantly increase the times to deploy forces in any of the scenarios. In particular, the study pointed out how it would take about four times as long to deploy a brigade group at limited war scale into the Persian Gulf or into Eastern Malaysia and twice as long to do the same in internal security scenarios. Similar extended timescales were required for battalion level deployments anywhere east of Suez.³⁹

It should come as no surprise that a force structure designed to deliver military action in concert with Australia and New Zealand offered an opportunity to maximise the potential effects of British deployments east of Suez. The obvious key advantage was the substantive basing and logistical backing from partners. This could afford the UK to sustain one division, with relevant naval and air support, in a limited war for a period of three to six months. The force would have improved mobility but limited assault entry capability. The same configuration would also be in a position to deliver internal security and counter insurgency operations anywhere in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ Acting independently, conversely, British forces would have been able to meet the requirements for a limited war only at the level

35. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy (Official) Committee, 'Minutes of a Meeting of the Working Party', CAB 148/53, 27 July 1966, 4.

36. Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez*, op. cit., 140-142.

37. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 'Annex B: Capability Study', CAB 148/44, 19 July 1965, 33-34.

38. *Ibid.*, 39. Also, UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 'Draft Terms of Reference for Political Studies', CAB 148/52, 12 April 1965.

39. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 'Annex B: Capability Study', op. cit., 34-35.

40. *Ibid.*, 40.

of two brigade groups (including a strategic reserve brigade deployed from the UK) with appropriate air and naval support for a period of up to three months. Logistical support would be severely limited and, depending on individual areas within the region, deployment times would require longer response periods.⁴¹

The report's conclusions were damning. The downscaling of presence and resources in the Middle and Far East regions would directly result in:

'(...) a loss of flexibility and speed of response, deprive us of certain secure points of entry and thereby reduce our ability to deter, and our stabilising influence in the world'.⁴²

By the summer of the following year, British defence officials were proactively pursuing an agenda that de-emphasised the possibility of the country's permanent military presence in Southeast Asia, and emphasised a more indirect approach to the projection and importance of British military power. For example, in a paper drafted in spring 1966 for circulation among the quadripartite allies, officials took great care to remark that across the geographic area running from Vietnam to Pakistan:

'(...) a Western military presence on the periphery, in Australia or island based in Pacific or Indian Oceans would serve as a psychological compensation for and deterrent against the overwhelming Chinese military strength'.⁴³

In related documents on Indo-Pacific policy, the working committee went even further expressing opinions on the relevance of military power in the region that could be interpreted as aiming at masking weakness rather than at presenting a clear strategic vision. The committee's judgement was that it should have not been underestimated how the presence of western forces could hinder the development in Southeast Asia of a coexistence of the 'Communist and Western worlds'.⁴⁴ Against this background, Britain's main objectives in the Indo-Pacific were two-fold. On the one hand, government officials intended to offer options for a military contribution that could be consistent with the increasingly tighter requirements for defence spending. On the other, the timing and manner of the expected force reductions were to be conducted in a way that would not leave allies exposed and regional actors in a position 'of weakness ripe for exploitation by the Chinese Communists'.⁴⁵

For all these reasons, a significant component of the British Indo-Pacific strategy down to 1967 kept focusing on the possibility to secure logistical and financial support for new bases in Australia. The British MoD further complemented this idea by proposals to develop joint military contingency planning within the framework of quadripartite discussions to give substance to its military deployment in Australia. Neither notion, however, gained particular traction with allies.⁴⁶ With the loss of flexibility and support that lack of a forward presence entailed, options for an Indo-

With the loss of flexibility and support that a lack of a forward presence entailed, options for an Indo-Pacific strategy continued to shrink

41. *Ibid.*, 34-35, 41.

42. *Ibid.*, 42.

43. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 'Future Indo-Pacific Strategy', CAB 148/54, 16 March 1966, 13.

44. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 'Indo-Pacific Policy', CAB 148/54, 29 April 1966, 4.

45. *Ibid.*, 4.

46. UKNA, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 'The Long-Term Role of Far East Forces', CAB 148/54, 05 October 1966, 7-8.

Pacific strategy continued to shrink and so did the actual possibility of a meaningful military contribution farther away east of Suez.

Within the context of the debate over the importance to tie British strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific to allies in the region, a new prospect emerged during Prime Minister Wilson visit to Washington DC late in December 1965. Prompted by a question by Secretary of Defence McNamara, the British Government set the FCO to give 'closer consideration' to Japan's role in Asian defence.⁴⁷ By mid-January 1966, the FCO was officially reporting back to the Cabinet Office that from a British perspective, Japan's involvement into defence arrangements to maintain Asian stability was desirable and indeed something to be hoped for. For the FCO, such an involvement was nonetheless subject to a strong lack in Japanese 'constitutional, political, and psychological' appetite to participate to Asian defence.⁴⁸

A request for Japanese military involvement in Asian defence arrangements was seen, as a result, as a premature affair. Indeed, the United States' heavy involvement in Japanese security and military posture raised a question as to whether Japanese defence participation was a feasible proposition.⁴⁹ On a similar note, British officials felt that even requests of financial contributions to shoulder some of the burden of Asian defence would not be welcomed by Japanese authorities, especially if this created no clear rewards. In all, whilst the FCO remained supportive of a Japanese role in Asian security, it considered that neither military nor financial participation to Asian defence arrangements were within the realm of Japanese policy options.⁵⁰ Instead, Japan could be expected to contribute more to economically support the development of the region as a way to 'indirectly contribute to stability'.⁵¹ This, in turn, would be helpful to British long-term objectives for the region.

Within a matter of months, the Defence and Oversea Policy Committee completed its activity and less than a year later Prime Minister Wilson officially announced Britain's withdrawal from east of Suez. In 1971, remaining tensions between treaty commitments to regional allies and the need to significantly downscale the country's military presence in the wider Indo-Pacific were resolved in the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). These defence agreements did not imply any concrete British commitment, but were designed to keep Britain on the Southeast Asian security map by virtue of a clause calling for immediate consultations in the event or threat of armed attack. In military terms, regular exercises held within this framework contributed to maintain some degree of military interaction among the parties to the present day.

47. UKNA, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Japan's Role in the Future Defence Arrangements in the Indo-Pacific Area', CAB 148/72, 13 January 1966.

48. UKNA, CAB 148/72, 13 January 1966.

49. UKNA, CAB 148/72, 13 January 1966.

50. UKNA, CAB 148/72, 13 January 1966.

51. UKNA, CAB 148/72, 13 January 1966.

52. Prashantah Parameswaran, 'Joint Military Exercise Highlights Five Power Defence Agreements', *The Diplomat*, 17 October 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/joint-military-exercise-highlights-five-power-defense-agreements/>; Prashantah Parameswaran, 'Five Power Defence Agreements in the Spotlight with Land Exercise', *The Diplomat*, 12 June 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/five-power-defense-arrangements-in-the-spotlight-with-land-exercise/>.

Days of Future Past – A Strategy Now that Never Was Then?

Britain's process of military withdrawal from the Indo-Pacific has witnessed a degree of change over the last year. The deployment of four major surface combatants in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as notable activities such as the exercise of the Royal Marine Commandos with the Japan Ground Self-Defence Force and the challenge to excessive maritime claims in the South China Sea conducted by HMS Albion, have reminded the region of how Britain can make a difference. These were, however, reactions to a deteriorating security landscape. The deployments have also contributed to raise expectations on the return of British forces in the eastern theatres of the Indo-Pacific. Whilst this question of a return east of Suez into the Indo-Pacific region is currently debated within and outside official circles, the experience of the overseas defence posture review of the mid-1960s allows us to formulate some suggestions on relevant answers.⁵³ In particular, looking back at the observations pertaining to the notion of a British strategic role in the Indo-Pacific and to the nature of a military commitment to implement it, four conclusions are particularly relevant.

First of all, in a fashion not too dissimilar from the mid-1960s, it could be argued that whilst a UK role in maintaining the security of the Indo-Pacific is not 'needed', it is in fact highly desirable. In a context of increasing pressure on regional actors in this part of the world to 'pick a side' in the tensions between the United States and China as a result of the political and military assertion of the latter, the UK can play a stabilizing role. It can politically support allies, reassure partners, and signal and deter competitors. In particular, the British idea in the 1960s to prioritise a role that would help shaping the security environment by promoting stability and long-term support to the current regional order retains value. A 'belt' of politically stable and economically prosperous Southeast Asian state actors is in British strategic and economic interests.

The UK – as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and a leading actor in the Commonwealth and the FPDA – could play such a role both in multilateral forums and through bilateral relations. The recent reestablishing of diplomatic representations in the South Pacific is a step in the right direction, as is the political willingness to re-energise the central role of the FCO in providing the raw materials upon which to build a 'shaping' diplomacy.⁵⁴ In turn, greater political visibility could lend valuable assistance to reboot Britain's profile as an international

53. For example, cf. International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'Optimising the UK's Maritime Posture in the Indo-Pacific Region', *Seminar Report* (December 2018); John Hemmings and James Rogers, *The South China Sea: Why it Matters to "Global Britain"* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2019).

54. Tom Tugendhat, 'The Foreign Office Must Be the Engine of Our Foreign Policy Again', *The House - Parliament's Magazine*, 30 September 2018, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/foreign-affairs/house-of-house-magazine/98624/tom-tugendhat-foreign-office-must-be-engine-our>.

actor in a part of the world that is likely to increase in economic significance in the aftermath of Brexit. On this point, whilst economic considerations did not drive a British role in Indo-Pacific security in the 1960s, the long-term objectives of a role that could favour stability underline the indirect link between security and the creation of prosperity.

The second conclusion unfolds from the first. A UK political role is desirable but its ambitions and potential will be underwritten by the nature

Accessing bases in Japan would also serve the purpose of sustaining a British commitment to Korean peninsula stability as much as an opportunity to monitor Russian activities

of a military commitment to the region. In particular, the experience of the 1960s suggests that a sustained presence, more than its scale, is key to its political and strategic value. Within this context, in the 1960s, the ability to permanently deploy forces within the region to support a

wider shared strategic agenda with close allies was seen as of a paramount importance. Of course, such an option did not come without drawbacks, notably by limiting autonomy. Today, a robust discussion should take place as to whether to reestablish the forward deployment of British military capabilities in the region and develop together with it a series of base access agreements in addition to current arrangements in Singapore and Brunei. One key issue to explore is whether and to what extent Australia would be a natural launching pad for a forward deployed UK force – especially as the country has signed up to re-introduce British built capabilities at the heart of its future fleet.⁵⁵ Japan could also be considered as another close partner that could afford significant logistical support for a British presence in the Northeast Asian sector given its close military ties with the United States and the development of a trilateral partnership with the UK.⁵⁶ The value of accessing bases in Japan would also serve the purpose of sustaining a British commitment to Korean peninsula stability as much as offer an opportunity to monitor Russian activities.

The third conclusion pertains to the question of the composition of British military presence in the Indo-Pacific. There is no doubt that, like in the 1960s, British capabilities remain under significant constraints from a budgetary perspective. This, however, should not be seen as a limitation in itself. Today, as in the 1960s, the key question is how to correlate available means with desired ends on the basis of the requirements of the security landscape. In the 1960s overseas defence policy review the answer to this question was a flexible, scalable, expeditionary military force.

Today, the wisdom of the 1960s continues to ring true. In particular, such a force would require three features to achieve maximum effect. The first concerns reliable picture-building capabilities drawing upon a mix of national efforts and information sharing with allies. The second requirement revolves around needs for interoperability and operational planning, which could be achieved through exercises and enhanced, targeted mil-mil relations. Countries like Australia and Japan should be regarded as a top priority in terms of developing joint operational capabilities. New

55. Nigel Pittaway, 'Australia Officially Announces \$26B Frigate Contract. Here are the Build Details', *Defence News*, 29 June 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2018/06/29/australia-officially-announces-26b-frigate-contract-here-are-the-build-details/>.

56. 'Royal Navy Joins US, Japan for Inaugural Trilateral Asia-Pacific Exercise', *Naval Today*, 21 December 2018, <https://navaltoday.com/2018/12/21/royal-navy-joins-us-japan-for-inaugural-trilateral-asia-pacific-exercise/>.

Zealand, Canada, and the Republic of Korea should also be regarded as highly valued partners for joint exercises and military relations. The third requirement pertains to the crucial need for a maritime centric military posture. In a region in which access and poise are defined by maritime connectivity, naval assets are critical to maximise presence and response.

Against this background, in a security context in which major surface combatants like an aircraft carrier might undermine a British political role by means of antagonising potential competitors and smaller, nimbler assets might fail to reassure partners and allies, a middle ground is still possible. Assets like the current Bay-class landing ships possess poise and flexibility, visibility and affordability. Above all, assets of this kind would be ideally suited to support robust military actions in case of contestation of excessive maritime claims as well as other critical shaping security functions – from capacity building to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and support to nationals overseas. As it has been argued elsewhere, in a region that is prone to man-made and natural disasters, a force capable of being at the forefront of this array of security challenges would be performing deterrence and relationship building functions at the same time.⁵⁷

This type of asset readily available in the region would not be merely a military capability deployed overseas. It would be a floating piece of the UK in a globalised world. In this respect, reassurance and support to allies could very well be complemented by interactions with other actors – including China – by promoting military understanding from a constructive and meaningful position. Deterrence and diplomacy are two-sides of the same political coin, and an asset as substantive as an amphibious ship would allow to perform both. Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has given reason to believe that this might very well be the path to be chosen by the government with the idea to explore the deployment of one future ‘Littoral Strike Ship’ in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁸

The fourth observation is perhaps the most important for a British strategy in the Indo-Pacific to succeed. Contrary to the mid-1960s when a shaping posture was seen as difficult to sit comfortably with close working relations with allies, today the opposite is true. The UK does not have to choose between a proactive security role and supporting allies. Today, a proactive security role will enhance and support allies. As Japanese and Australian senior political figures have repeatedly suggested, regional allies want more Britain, not less. This is a key difference in that it highlights the most significant potential of a British carrier in the South China Sea. A British carrier would not represent a lofty attempt at restating the romantic glory of a bygone era. It could be the centre-piece of a force that could easily include Australian escorts, Japanese F-35B jets, and American marines – to name but a few of the capabilities of close partners. It would be a magnet for all those who wish to contribute to a stable maritime order.

A force structure in the Indo-Pacific developed around an amphibious ship, complemented by other rotational forces and enhanced by a set of military arrangements with close partners might very well allow succeeding where the mid-1960s Indo-Pacific strategy failed. It would be a presence

57. Alessio Patalano, 'Beyond the Gunboats: Rethinking Naval Diplomacy and Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief in East Asia', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 160, 2015:2, 32-39.

58. Williamson, 'Defence in Global Britain', *op. cit.*, 11 February 2019.

tailored to regional security and capable of delivering effectiveness. Defence Secretary Williamson has suggested that Global Britain ‘has to be about action’. As he put it, Global Britain has to be about ‘(t)aking action alongside our friends and allies. Action to strengthen the hand of fragile nations and to support those who face natural disasters. Action to oppose those who flout international law’.⁵⁹ Whether this is going to be the essence of a new doctrine in foreign and security policy remains to be seen. It nonetheless offers at the very least an opportunity for the past to find a place to propel the present into the future.

⁵⁹. *Ibid.*



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ISBN: 978-1-910812-67-9

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