

Written evidence submitted by Dr Michito Tsuruoka (INR0091)

Britain's tilt to the Indo-Pacific from a Japanese perspective

Summary

- Japan welcomes the idea of “global Britain” and ready to help it.
- The UK’s “plug-in” to the US alliances in Asia needs to be developed further.
- The UK needs to get Southeast Asia fully on board in its tilt to the Indo-Pacific.
- The question as to whether, how, to what extent and in what areas the UK’s approach or goals in the Indo-Pacific region are different from those of the US needs to be fully elaborated and presented.
- Tokyo seeks a framework to keep the UK involved in Japan-Europe cooperation.

Introduction

1. While Tokyo never wanted to see Brexit, it welcomes the idea of “global Britain” and the UK’s increasing engagement in Asia – the UK’s return to Asia or tilt to the Indo-Pacific. As the importance of the region increases, it is in the UK’s own interest to be more involved. The UK’s departure from the EU will also make its relationships with the Indo-Pacific region more vital. In addition, the fact that the United States, the closest ally for the UK, is shifting its strategic focus to Asia (or more precisely, to China) provides yet another reason why Britain needs to increase its presence in the region, giving a strategic message to Washington that “we are with you there.”
2. However, perceptions in Japan are divided: some believe the UK will be able to do a lot, whereas others remain sceptical about the extent to which the UK could allocate its limited foreign policy and security resources – likely to be more limited as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic – to Asia. Assuming that the UK is serious in increasing its engagement in Asia, the latter kind of scepticism is something London will need to address: Perceptions matter.

Security & Defence

3. The fact that the UK is arguably the closest ally of the United States makes it easy for the country to “plug-in” the US alliance network, particularly the US-Japan and US-Australia (ANZUS) alliances. Embedding British personnel to strategically significant US outposts (or increasing the number of embeds where the UK already has some) in the region, including Yokosuka (JPN), Guam (US) and Darwin (AUS) are of mutual interest. At the same time, there needs to be more joint training and exercises bilaterally between Japan and the UK and trilaterally including the US, or in larger formats involving Australia, India or France, to enhance interoperability among those countries.
4. There have been some press reports regarding the idea of stationing one of two Royal Navy aircraft carriers on a permanent basis in the Pacific. It is too early to

say whether this is really a viable option. What is clear, however, is that there are not many candidate ports (naval bases) available in the region that are suitable for hosting an aircraft carrier in terms of the size and, more crucially, support facilities including an air field to accommodate onboard aircraft. If it becomes a reality, the (permanent) presence of the UK aircraft carrier would send a strong message that Britain is committed to the region. However, the challenge of articulating a strategically and politically viable set of missions and purposes for such a move should not be underestimated – London needs to address to different audiences simultaneously: the British domestic audience (on why it is not a waste of resources), US as an ally (on how the UK could fight with Americans: how to “plug-in”), partners like Japan (on how it could cooperate in peacetime and in contingency), Southeast Asians (on why it could contribute to the stability of the region) and China (on why it is needed). Japan and other countries which are in position to encourage the UK’s engagement will also need to articulate what they expect and how they could help Britain increase its engagement in their own region.

5. From Tokyo’s perspective, getting the UK on board in addressing security challenges in East Asia for now is essentially about sending a strategic message to Beijing that other countries in the world including those in other parts of the world, like the UK, are also watching the situation closely. This is part of deterrence as well. This is significant in light of the fact that China always tries to make the international community believe that only the United States and Japan are challenging Chinese actions, because those countries do not want to accept the reality of the rise of China. Responding to this kind of discourse, it is vital to demonstrate that other countries are equally against China’s assertive behaviours in the region and beyond.

Trade

6. An FTA (free trade agreement) between Japan and the UK is likely to be concluded shortly, despite lastminute disagreement on Stilton cheese. While the FTA is significant in its own right, its value goes beyond the realm of trade and economy and it is supposed to build a new foundation on which to build the bilateral relations in the coming years and decades following Brexit. In light of the fact that other FTA negotiations, particularly those with the US, are currently not going well and unlikely to be concluded by the end of the EU transition period (Dec 2020), the meaning of the deal with Japan has increased.
7. While there are some criticism regarding the way in which London negotiates trade deals, London’s hyper-active approach (at least in terms of the number of FTA negotiations that it has opened so far) has been impressive, reassuring the world that Britain is not becoming inward-looking and remains committed to the principle of free trade.
8. However, we need to recognise the reality that Britain’s accession to the CPTPP (Progressive and Comprehensive agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership: TPP11), though welcomed, will not come quickly. London will have to conduct bilateral

negotiations with all the current members with diverse interest and priorities (11 countries). One of the interesting aspects of CPTPP is that 6 out of 11 members are Commonwealth countries (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore), which Britain could find comfortable and they could facilitate accession negotiations. However, too much emphasis on the Commonwealth factor could alienate non-Commonwealth countries, which London is best advised to avoid.

Foreign Policy & Politics

9. Britain's tilt to the Indo-Pacific (or "return to Asia") will not succeed without getting Southeast Asian (ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries fully on board. Those are the countries that are situated right at the centre of the Indo-Pacific region. They connect the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. The UK maintains a special defence relationships in the context of the FPDA (Five Powers Defence Arrangements) with Malaysia and Singapore (in addition to Australia and New Zealand). But their support to the UK's security and defence engagement in Southeast Asia cannot be taken for granted.
10. Their cautiousness partly stems from history and memory – particularly they do not like to see a situation where external major powers dictate the region – the biggest factor these days obviously concerns the "strategic competition" between the US and China. ASEAN countries, including those who share values with the US, simply do not want to take sides in this regard. Some of them understand that it is becoming untenable to evade such a choice. But many of them are still trying hard to avoid taking sides.
11. This explains why Southeast Asians (and in other parts of the world as well, including Japan to a lesser extent) keep wondering what the UK represents in the region. They ask: Are British policy goals, interests, tools and approaches identical to those of the US? If so, what added values could the UK bring to the region? Will the UK simply force us to take sides on behalf of the US? If that is not the case, to what extent and in what areas are the UK's approach or goals different from the US? It is impossible to control the way other people perceive of the UK. Yet, it is still indispensable for the UK to formulate its ideas about how it wants to be seen in Asia, not least in relation to the US. Given the situations in the region described above, it seems that it is not in the UK interest to be seen as identical to the US (or "little US"). This is a difficult and sensitive problem, which Japan faces as well in its relations with many ASEAN countries. In many instances, the fact that Japan is not the US helps. Japan-UK dialogue on this could also be envisaged. We need a better understanding about our division of labour in this regard.
12. Related to Brexit, Tokyo wants to see a new venue where it could meet the EU and the UK together. In other words, Japan believes it is vital to keep the UK involved in Japan-EU conversation, particularly on foreign policy and security issues. This should also be in the interest of Britain and the EU. There are several possible ways to materialise this idea: (1) make use of the G7 framework, where Japan, France, Germany, Italy, the UK as well as the EU are represented; (2) establish a

new “E3+Japan” framework or a “quartet” (E3 either only by France, Germany and the UK or adding the EU); (3) establish a new Japan-UK-EU trilateral framework (the EU being represented by Brussels rather than member states), (4) establish an extended “quartet” by adding the US or pursue something in line with the Johnson government’s idea of “D10” involving the world’s leading democracies (major countries in Europe, Japan, US, Canada and Australia, etc.). These options are not mutually exclusive and we could pursue multiple frameworks simultaneously. But our purpose is to make things efficient and effective and establishing new frameworks should not become an end in itself.

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