

## Written evidence submitted by Robin Porter (TIP0004)

### Tilting to the 'Indo-Pacific': has the Government lost the plot ?

#### Summary

1.
  - the construct of an 'Indo-Pacific' is analysed and challenged
  - the long-standing objectives of British foreign policy are recalled and the proposed new focus examined in the light of these
  - the mechanisms for the UK to achieve greater influence in the region are considered in turn for their existing or proposed function, and their capacity to advance the UK's position
  - a distinction is made between military involvement on one hand and all branches of diplomatic activity on the other, in particular in respect to any activity likely to be seen as threatening by China

#### Brief introduction to the author

2. Robin Porter is an academic China specialist who in a fifty year career has taught at universities in Canada, Australia and the UK. He first visited China in 1972, worked for Xinhua News Agency in 1979/80, has been an adviser on China to industry, and was Britain's senior science and technology diplomat in Beijing from 2002 to 2005. He has carried out research on China for the Ministry of Defence on security aspects of China's import-export control regime, and as a Visiting Professor at the Global Insecurities Centre, University of Bristol, he initiated and co-edited the book *British Foreign Policy and the National Interest: Identity, Strategy and Security* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

#### OVERVIEW

##### The idea of an 'Indo-Pacific': How useful ?

3. The idea of an 'Indo-Pacific' region reaching in broad terms from the east coast of Africa to the West coast of the United States is relatively recent. It embraces not only the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, but all the areas of water in between, as well as the multiplicity of lands and cultures to be found along the shores of these great stretches of ocean. The term 'Indo-Pacific' is intended to include all those parts of the world which, in the public mind, have achieved rapid economic growth in recent years.

4. For American policy-makers it is also intended to denote a relatively new area of strategic concern in the Indian Ocean, requiring a military presence. It will be recalled that for several decades following World War Two the US took primary responsibility for patrols in the Atlantic and Pacific, while the UK was assigned responsibility for the Indian Ocean. Since UK withdrawal from the Gulf states, and from Singapore in 1970, however, the UK has ceased to play a very active role in the region.
5. For the US, the rapid rise of China, not only in economic terms, but also taking the form of naval activity to assert its influence along its coasts and in the South China Sea, as well as along the trade routes in the Indian Ocean, is now seen as a threat. In essence therefore, for the US, concern over the 'Indo-Pacific' has primarily military implications.
6. It is suggested here then, that only in a geographical sense does the term 'Indo-Pacific' really have any meaning, and that it does not shed any light on the aspirations or current political direction of states in the region, which are in reality quite diverse. Nor is it helpful in defining an approach in diplomatic, commercial or cultural terms which could usefully guide other countries in their interactions with those states. Countries outside the region now focusing more on the 'Indo-Pacific' states can and do all have their own distinct agendas, which may or may not have a military dimension. The 'Indo-Pacific' may therefore prove to be a somewhat hollow construct.

### **Longstanding objectives of British foreign policy**

7. Historically, certain fundamental principles have guided British foreign policy as the country has sought to protect and advance its interests in its relations with other states. Core among these have been:
  - a belief in the rule of law, specifically in this case international law
  - a primary concern with the international politics of Europe
  - promotion of Britain's economic interests overseas
  - the military defence of the realm
  - the maintenance of freedom of movement internationally for British subjects
8. There have been strong echoes of these concerns in the 'global objectives' of Britain's foreign policy in recent times. To these, since 2001, have been added terrorism, and the security of energy supplies, while collaboration on climate change and on scientific projects of all kinds have also featured heavily among the objectives of our diplomacy. It is the contention of this paper that the principles encompassed in these objectives are as close as it may be possible to come to an explicit statement of the UK's 'national interests' where they relate to our foreign policy today.
9. If these points remain an accurate summation of the principal concerns of our diplomacy and military strategy, and it is strongly contended that they do, it is hard to see how our interests will be promoted by a forward posture focussed on the 'Indo-Pacific'. Put most simply, we used to have quite specific interests in the 'Indo-Pacific' when we had an empire and occupied India and what is now Pakistan,

Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, and other islands and territories in the Pacific, as well as having residual obligations towards Australia and New Zealand. But we no longer have these responsibilities, nor do we aspire to having them.

10. While we believe in promoting the rule of law, Britain's economic and trading interests, and the maintenance of the freedom of movement for our citizens, the 'Indo-Pacific' should be no more a focus for these concerns than anywhere else, and indeed may be of much less pressing concern than some other parts of the world. Moreover, by reason of geography, the international politics of Europe should always remain our primary concern, and the military defence of the realm should reflect this too.

### **The multiplicity of diplomatic and security mechanisms through which the UK might enhance its profile in the 'Indo-Pacific'**

11. Among the recently conceived or longer-standing mechanisms or strategies relating to the 'Indo-Pacific' in which the UK might, or already does, participate as a full member or as an observer are the following:

- the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP)
- the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
- the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
- the Quad
- The Five Power Defence Arrangements
- Five Eyes

12. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, described as a 'shared vision' by the US State Department, was conceived originally by the Trump administration in 2017. In essence it consists of a diplomatic and development effort to promote two-way trade and investment, infrastructural development, energy projects, the digital economy, and democratic institutions among the 'more than 35' countries in the region, as well as 'countering trans-national threats'. Hundreds of billions of dollars had already been invested in a wide variety of projects by 2019.

13. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership is a free trade agreement among eleven countries around the Pacific. Originating in 2016, named the Trans Pacific Partnership and incorporating the US, a hiatus followed the Trump administration's withdrawal. Its membership currently comprises: Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam. The UK applied to join in 2021, and its application is being considered.

14. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand to promote economic growth, social progress and cultural development. It now also includes Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, with Papua New Guinea and East Timor having Observer status. Originally set up as a bulwark against the spread of

communism, ASEAN is now focused on emulating the European Union in the scope of its concerns and activities.

15. The Quad, comprising the US, India, Japan and Australia, can trace its origins to 2007, but has only recently come to play a more active role in the affairs of Indo-Pacific states. Originally conceived as a response to the tsunami of 2004, the Quad's latest focus is to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is 'free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion'. Most pressing current issues include covid and developing a vaccination programme, climate change, and 'security challenges facing the region'. Specific mention is made of 'challenges to the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas'.
16. The Five Power Defence Arrangements date back to the UK's decision in 1967 to withdraw from its bases east of Suez. The Arrangements provide for the UK, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand to confer immediately to decide on a response to any attack on any one of the group. Their principal focus is the Malayan Peninsula and surrounding waters. The collaboration remains in force today, and revolves around a small presence at RMAF Butterworth in Malaysia, and periodic group air and naval exercises.
17. The 'Five Eyes' intelligence collaboration between the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand grew out of intelligence sharing during the Second World War. Originally concerned postwar principally with the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe, more recently the gathering of intelligence about China has become a major focus. Cracks began to appear in the organization when earlier in 2021 New Zealand refused to join the other members in denouncing China for its treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, its heavy military presence in the South China Sea, its handling of pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, and its assertion that it will 'take back' Taiwan by 2049. Five Eyes continues to function, and is at the centre of a web of other intelligence sharing operations related to different situations worldwide.

### **Regional diplomacy or containment of China ?**

18. Two features of the existing and proposed patterns of engagement with the Indo-Pacific stand out. The first is that, of the six organizations or collaborative projects noted above, four have a significant military dimension, actual or implied. Unavoidably, this begs the question: who is seen as the principal threat ? In each case, it is hard to avoid the implication that it is China, now widely described as 'rising China'.
19. The other outstanding feature of these organizations is that the majority of them are led by the United States, and their objectives are predicated on the assumption that China must be once again 'contained', through a revival of the containment strategy pursued by the US in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. It is very important to remember that despite our differences with China at the time, the UK did not support the American policy of isolation and containment of China. Indeed, through much of that period of thirty years we sustained a limited trade with the People's Republic which formed a

sound basis for much expanded trade, technology transfer, and scientific, educational and cultural exchanges beginning in the early 1990s. It is not, and has never been, in the UK's interests to have a hostile relationship with China.

## **Specific questions raised by the Committee**

### **Regional questions**

*What are the UK's main interests in the Indo-Pacific region, and what are the main threats and opportunities?*

20. The UK's main interests in the Indo-Pacific as a whole today lie in 1.) the maintenance of the integrity of sea lanes for international trade; 2.) the preservation of peace in the region as a whole; and 3.) successfully addressing issues of climate change which, because of sea level rise, will otherwise cause massive disruption to many states in the region, and intensified patterns of migration. It should be recognized that, despite government rhetoric to the contrary, opportunities to expand our export trade in the region may be limited. It is contended that the main threats in the region come, not from China, but from within Pakistan and certain Gulf states willing to countenance terrorist organizations operating in their midst, and with a remit that could extend to the UK itself.

*How can the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy complement that of allies, such as the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy? Are there possible areas of competition with European partners such as France and Germany?*

21. While the UK may support some of the goals of the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, it should steer well clear of committing itself to any military strategy resembling containment of China. Notably, it should not be undertaking with the US navy joint exercises off the coast of China. We have never previously committed ourselves to protecting Taiwan from China, nor should we. For the Chinese government, Taiwan is an issue arising from the Chinese civil war of the late 1940s; moreover the stated timeframe of the Chinese government allows almost another thirty years for it to be resolved peacefully.
22. While France and Germany broadly support the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific, they see their involvement in a different way. It has been suggested that France is mainly interested in protecting its remaining territories among the islands of the Pacific, and not in any larger commitment, while Germany is promoting the full range of its commercial, cultural and development objectives in the region, but falls shy of a military commitment. Germany, it is said, would prefer to see an EU policy towards the region, in which it would then play an active part.
23. In some areas of diplomacy, such as scientific cooperation with countries in the region, the best scope for collaboration with EU partners such as France and Germany would have been taking a joint approach through one or other of the European Union's agencies, for example the Science and Technology Directorate. Regrettably this route is no longer possible, and the scope for collaboration will have to be

negotiated with each ally individually. It should be pointed out that any military cooperation would be problematic because of the divergent strategic goals of the various potential partners.

*What are the geopolitical implications of the UK's potential accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership?*

24. Primarily a free trade grouping which the UK has applied to join, its leading members are Japan, Australia and Canada. In the writer's experience, having lived in both of the latter, there is little appetite for British goods following the UK's abrupt abandonment of imperial preference arrangements in the 1970s, which is still remembered.

*How can the UK maximise the influence brought by its new status as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner? And what should it use this influence for?*

25. It is questionable whether becoming an ASEAN Dialogue Partner will make the UK carry more weight in the region. However it is an opportunity to try to bring influence to bear to achieve peaceful resolution of any disputes, and adherence to the rule of law.

*How should the UK respond to China's growing military assertiveness in the region? How should the UK prepare for responding to potential flashpoints like Taiwan and the Senkaku islands?*

26. Diplomatically. The only possible resolution is through China-Taiwan negotiations and China-Japan negotiations. As the pre-eminent Asian Power, China may feel entitled to exercise influence around its coast, though not in the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean

*How can the new Build Back Better World/Clean Green Initiative be used most effectively as an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative in the Indo-Pacific?*

27. These initiatives are not really comparable. The Belt and Road scheme is primarily intended to serve China's needs for food, raw materials and influence, whereas the 'Build Back Better'/Green Initiative is primarily a concept designed to encourage sustainable growth.

*What should be the resource priorities for the FCDO's new Indo-Pacific Directorate? Where should the FCDO focus on increasing its footprint in terms of Posts and staff?*

28. I am unable to say.

*How can the UK build on and enhance existing defence arrangements in the region, such as the Quad, the Five Power Defence Arrangements, and Five Eyes?*

29. Quite apart from the folly of appearing to take on China, the UK's military contribution in this part of the world has long been seen as more symbolic than real. Even US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is said to have observed recently that the

UK's new aircraft carrier would be more useful in Europe. Far better to keep any military presence low profile.

### **Country specific questions**

*What should the UK's approach be to strengthening relations with Indonesia, Japan and Taiwan?*

30. Diplomatic in all its varieties, but not military

*In what areas should the UK prioritise deeper collaboration with these countries (e.g. trade, education, science and tech, defence and security, development)?*

31. In all these areas: trade, education, science and technology, development where appropriate, cultural exchanges, security by all means (but not military exercises).

*How can the UK improve its partnership with Indonesia in areas including land and environmental rights, and promoting open societies and rule of law in the region?*

32. Very unlikely to be achievable.

*How should the UK Government work with Japan to support the improvement of cyber security, development of advanced technologies, and values-based digital growth in the Indo-Pacific? Should the UK look to expand Five Eyes to include Japan?*

33. Japan is likely to be the lead partner on cyber issues.

34. Five Eyes to include Japan? Possibly, but the grouping should not be turned into an anti-China cartel. New Zealand in its objections to this could well be followed by Canada otherwise.

*What specific support is needed by and for Taiwan in the face of growing aggression from the PRC? What commitments should the UK give?*

35. The UK should use its good offices to try to achieve a peaceful resolution of China-Taiwan differences. It is the view of the writer that 'hawks' on both sides have over-hyped the Taiwan issue.

### **BRIEF CONCLUSION**

36. The Indo-Pacific as a construct is not an especially happy creation, although a renewed focus on these parts of the world is certainly welcome, and an opportunity to upgrade our diplomatic effort there. Any increased military presence is another matter, and above all we should not go out of our way to gratuitously antagonize China. Whatever we may think of its current leadership and their policies, China in the long term is more important to us than the rest of the region put together.

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