

Written evidence submitted by Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum

Executive Summary

1. The Tilt's logic rests upon a solid assessment of British interests, and an understanding of the threat that China poses to the UK and its allies. But British capabilities are not robust enough to justify any major military shift towards the Indo-Pacific.
2. Instead of operating at the edge of its range, British strategy should instead focus on projecting power to the European littorals – the North Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Persian Gulf – where the United States is proving increasingly reluctant.
3. In doing so, the UK would complement American grand strategy. As the United States pivots to the Indo-Pacific, the UK and France are best suited to fill vacuums in the Eastern Mediterranean.
4. Retaining a focus in the greater North Atlantic region is a politically sensible decision, owing to the limited capacity of the UK; the immediacy of threats emerging from these regions; their demonstrable bearing on European security; and the UK's centuries-old strategic tradition in these regions.

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The Tilt in Grand Strategy

5. Britain's 'Indo-Pacific Tilt' stems from a recognition of the threat posed by a rising China to British interests.
6. In the long term, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aims to break the US' post-World War alliance networks and gain Indo-Pacific primacy.
7. Besides Imperial Japan, no major power has succeeded in disrupting Anglophone global sea control since British victory at Trafalgar. The contestation of this fact would have unforeseen consequences.
8. It is reasonable for the UK to consider how it might contribute to Indo-Pacific security using military, diplomatic, or economic power. Yet 'the fallacy of over-concentration' and emerging global trends significantly undermine the case for operationalising the tilt.

The Fallacy of Overconcentration

9. First, the Tilt risks falling prey to the fallacy of over-concentration, the idea that in any global conflict, only one theatre deserves attention and resources. This has been a recurring issue in Anglo-American strategy, from the Seven Years' War to the First World War's Western Front
10. Modern global political competition is *Eurasian* competition. Eurasia is the largest continental area on earth, home to 5.3 billion people and most of the world's natural resources. What China does in the Pacific is linked inextricably to the political balance of power in other regions, and the expense of resources in the Pacific takes away from resources available in Europe to defend its own periphery, creating political and military opportunities for Russia.
11. NATO overconcentration in the Asia-Pacific, particularly as the United States presses ahead with its own pivot to that region, would result in a poorly-defended Europe and an unstable Middle East. This would create vacuums that in turn facilitate Chinese economic predation and Russian military predation.
12. American domestic politics is already turning against the Middle East, as the Biden administration's ignominious Afghan withdrawal demonstrates. American resolve and capacity is under doubt at home and abroad, and a string of American failures in the Middle East – Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2012, Syria in 2013 – has strengthened American resolve to exit the region. American rivals have filled the vacuums its exit has created: Iraq is largely subordinate to Iranian power, and both Libya and Syria have been carved into Russian and Turkish spheres of influence.
13. While Taiwan's fate is a question of fundamental importance, there is little to suggest that an urgent shift of the bulk of NATO capacity to the Indo-Pacific would improve Taiwanese defences. Such a shift would drastically diminish the credibility of the West elsewhere and

- would, in the absence of coherent international brokerage, trigger uninhibited intra-regional competition facilitating Chinese and Russian expansion.
14. A crisis of confidence in the West's ability to keep treaties and maintain influence is conducive to the realisation of long-term Chinese goals. An eroding international consensus around global American primacy and liberal democratic norms, combined with a smaller NATO footprint on the Eurasian littorals, will undermine America's ability to exercise global leadership. Recent examples include Egypt's 2017 decision to grant Russia air basing rights; Saudi Arabian and Turkish acquisition of Russian military materiel; Europe's uneven ban of Huawei from telecommunications infrastructure; and Italian and Greek participation in China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) project.
 15. An increasingly popular analogy for the American withdrawal from Kabul is the 1975 Fall of Saigon. The analogy is useful in one critical respect. Following the withdrawal, the Soviet Union 'tested' the U.S. elsewhere, namely Angola, Mozambique, and Yemen. But because of credible American commitments to European defence, the risk of war was minimal.
 16. More importantly, after 1973, the U.S. and China became tacit partners against the Soviets. Today, Russia and China cooperate to undermine the U.S. and its allies, working alongside Iran. All support 'sovereignty' and 'multipolarity' against Anglo-style liberal primacy. The two differ over certain long-term goals, but each state's actions furthers the others' goals *if* they reduce American, NATO, and allied power and prestige. Thus, the U.S. and its partners cannot focus on the Indo-Pacific alone. Trading Euro-Mediterranean or Middle Eastern security for an increased Indo-Pacific presence will undermine long-term British interests, inviting Russian attack, Iranian harassment, and Chinese pressure.
 17. Against this backdrop, the United States has embraced strategic over-concentration. The American bipartisan consensus around the 'pivot' to Asia, and a stubborn refusal to expand defence spending, support this trend. This will prompt the US Navy to shift its forces to the Indo-Pacific. Maritime power is critical to any European or Middle Eastern strategy. Regional sea control prevents multi-regional Russo-Iranian power projection and provides the UK and NATO with strategic flexibility.
 18. Throughout the Cold War, NATO's Mediterranean sea control limited Soviet pressure to southern Europe, while an increasingly offensive post-1980 naval posture jeopardised Soviet strategic premises. Like the Soviet Union, it seeks a maritime advantage to bypass NATO's front lines yet remains exposed to NATO naval pressure. The U.S. military, however, has committed to a Pacific tilt, shedding Marine Corps armoured units and optimising its forces for Pacific combat. Most notable is the U.S. Navy's *Divest to Invest* scheme, which will shrink the surface combatant fleet by around one-third in the next five years. The U.S. Navy claims that it will replace these older, larger ships with more lethal manned and unmanned small surface combatants – indeed, it is meant to operate 15 new frigates by 2026. However, none of the unmanned surface vehicles the Navy will use to replace its combat strength currently exist, while the American defence industrial base is incapable of producing 15 new 7,200-ton ships within five years. U.S. naval power thus lapse. The Biden administration has shown no willingness to increase defence spending to counter this trend. As time goes on – especially if inflation hamstring the US economy – these choices will lead to an even greater emphasis on the Indo-Pacific to the exclusion of all other interests.
 19. It will fall to American allies – above all, to France and the United Kingdom – to attend to the vacuums within the range of their projection capacity, particularly in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Greater Middle East. Attending to these vacuums would be a better use of British power, and a more suited role for a junior partner like the United Kingdom, than a Pacific tilt.

Capacity and the Tilt

20. The UK has a vested interest in countering China's rise. But the structure of British interests and shifts in American policy and force structure call into question the wisdom of a significant British Indo-Pacific naval presence. Moreover, British force structure undermines the case for a military Tilt. Extant British capabilities are insufficient to enable a long-term Indo-Pacific deployment that meaningfully influences the regional balance of forces.

21. The capacity limits of the UK Carrier Strike Group's (UKCSG) composition and Royal Navy force structure are apparent. The UKCSG was meant to contain ten ships: one carrier, three large surface combatants, three small surface combatants, two auxiliaries, and an attack submarine. A six-surface escort CSG is slightly larger than standard; American CSGs typically contain one to two guided-missile cruisers and two to three guided-missile destroyers. Naval planners reasonably calculated that the *Elizabeth* would require a larger escort complement given the Type-23 frigate's reduced capabilities as compared to the US DDG-51 class. Until the "Batch 1" Type-26 ships reach the fleet in sufficient numbers three to four years from now, the UKCSG will require this escort package, increasing stress on an already limited surface combatant force. A six-ship large surface combatant and 12-ship small surface combatant fleet can sustain British requirements *without a CSG*, given standard maintenance and training times between deployments.
22. The UKCSG's large surface combatant requirement will stress the fleet the most, given that *three* Type-45s are undergoing maintenance and one an engine upgrade. Moreover, the Type-45 HMS *Diamond* dropped out of the CSG in July due to engine issues, cutting the available Type-45 fleet to one ship. This explains the choice to include one American destroyer and one Dutch frigate in the UKCSG – on its first deployment, the Royal Navy has encountered capacity issues.
23. Even bracketing surface combatants, the Royal navy also struggles to field a full Carrier Air Wing.
24. The Royal Navy also has aerial capacity issues. The UKCSG's Carrier Air Wing (CVW) contains only 18 fixed-wing combat aircraft. Ten are American. Moreover, the CVW contains only 28 total aircraft, despite the *Elizabeth*-class' capacity to carry 36 F-35Bs. The cost-based choice to build two jump-jet carriers, rather than use a catapult-launching and arrested-recovery system, has hampered the UK's ability to construct a viable CVW.
25. The F-35B is virtually the only STOVL fixed-wing combat aircraft that will provide the UKCSG with sufficient combat air capability. In March 2021, it emerged that the Ministry of Defence is considering adding a CATOBAR system to the *Elizabeth*-class carriers. However, given the ships' current design, this addition will now allow them to operate heavier carrier fighter aircraft. The UKCSG could deploy lighter CATOBAR UCAVs, but no combat air UCAV currently exists, and the American MQ-25 Stingray's programme delays bode poorly for rapid development and deployment. Additionally, absent a CATOBAR system, the UKCSG cannot deploy persistent fixed-wing ISR/T or ASW aircraft, instead relying on less-capable helicopters.
26. British naval force structure demonstrates the UK's inability to conduct long-term CSG deployments to Asia without significant assistance. Even if it could do so, it is unclear how persistent British CSG deployments would affect the Indo-Pacific balance of power.
27. American *Nimitz* and *Ford*-class carriers are both significantly larger than the *Elizabeth*-class, typically deploy with six fixed-wing squadrons – four fighter, one electronic attack, one airborne early warning – and are *still* vulnerable to long-range People's Liberation Army (PLA) missiles.
28. Deterrence credibility rests upon warfighting capability and strategy. Increasingly the U.S. has identified that the Indo-Pacific conflict it faces does not match with its force structure. American CSGs are too vulnerable given the short-range of combat aircraft, the CVWs lack of purpose-built organic refuelling capabilities, and a dearth of long-range air-launched missiles.
29. The U.S. has begun to correct this, building smaller, lighter warships that can fight within the range of Chinese missiles, developing longer-range air-launched missiles, including an unmanned tanker within the CVW, developing ground-launched mobile anti-ship and anti-air missiles for deployment to the First Island Chain, and emphasising the survivability and natural stealth advantages of submarines and UUVs.
30. Given the *Elizabeth*-class' design characteristics, a UKCSG cannot deploy these capabilities without immediate investment in carrier-launched UCAVs, which will require a CATOBAR conversion and longer-range missiles, in turn raising funding and development schedule questions.
31. Not only, therefore, is a UKCSG strategically irrelevant. It is also vulnerable to attack by the exact capabilities that the PLA has developed to counter American CSGs.

The Case for a Mediterranean Tilt

32. Strategic and force structure considerations advise against committing to a military Indo-Pacific Tilt. The UK should neither disengage from Asia nor eliminate all regional military presence. But its greatest regional impact will be diplomatic, economic, and intelligence-based, and not military.
33. In the MENA region, meanwhile, climate change, population growth, youth unemployment, and other factors portend an upswing in future migration. Unstable governance makes future refugee crises another likely prospect. Should more political vacuums emerge in the region, as the ongoing Libyan crisis makes clear, Russia will be able to place anti-ship, anti-air, and ballistic missiles, and advanced Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems in the region.
34. As American security guarantees become increasingly untenable, nuclear proliferation becomes highly likely in the Middle East; beyond Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are the most likely candidates for nuclear armament. Another effect of American withdrawal will be the intensification of the Middle East's proxy wars; Europe will be at most risk from the externalities of these wars, particularly terrorism and refugee influxes.
35. Historically, the UK has sought to preserve the Middle Eastern status quo: from its century-long endeavour to sustain the Ottoman Empire against Russian predation to supporting regional monarchs – often unsuccessfully – against Soviet-aligned coups d'état. It has done so to prevent the emergence of vacuums that increase geopolitical friction and the possibility of conflict. Current British strategy and naval force structure enables increased engagement with the Mediterranean. It is to this region that a Tilt would have the greatest impact on British security and allied interests.
36. The Middle East's maritime space is an international pivot point, as British diplomatic history makes clear. The Eastern Mediterranean was central to 19th century British strategy. Even before the Suez Canal, controlling the Eastern Mediterranean allowed the UK to regulate European-Pacific trade. The Suez intensified these economic benefits and added military advantages, facilitating the transfer of forces between Europe and Asia if necessary. Controlling this maritime space was critical to British and allied victory in both world wars. The Royal Navy hemmed in Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman naval power, and successfully eliminated Indian Ocean commerce raiding by November 1914, enabling successful economic support until the U-Boat campaign escalated. Nazi Germany's ability to disrupt British sea control in the Levantine Basin reduced the UK's ability to act in the Pacific, while sea control facilitated the easier transfer of forces. These strategic dynamics explain the American emphasis on the Near East's maritime spaces throughout the Cold War and apply equally to contemporary Eurasian competition.
37. Other European powers are aware of these strategic realities. France hopes to become a central Middle Eastern and North African player, taking an active policy in Libya and Lebanon. Historically, France has sought to drive European foreign policy to compensate for its economic weakness compared to Germany. The UK should partner with France, particularly in view of France's shared close relationships with Gulf states, to close vacuums and support the regional status quo. Naturally, this will entail a concerted effort to fix Anglo-French relations after the AUKUS controversy.
38. Russia and China are attempting to expand their regional influence in MENA; both hope to sever the maritime link between NATO's European members and Anglo-American allies in the Indo-Pacific, while also regulating European trade flows.
39. The UK has never faced a situation in which it has been held hostage to an adversary's control of a regional chokepoint. Shifts in U.S. force structure and strategic rhetoric indicate that the US no longer views the Near East's littorals as a significant geographic space. A poor grasp of political reality does not eliminate strategic logic. The United Kingdom and France have a clear interest in maintaining NATO sea control in the Mediterranean.
40. This mission would require CSG and Surface Action Group (SAG) deployments to the Eastern Mediterranean at a greater frequency than at any point since the 1960s. Yet the logistical issues these deployments would create are nowhere near as significant as those that a UKCSG would face in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Mediterranean geography enables much greater cooperation between land-based air forces and naval units, as demonstrated

by NATO exercises throughout the Cold War and British theatre strategy from 1940 to 1944. It would be conceivable to deploy a slightly smaller UKCSG to the Mediterranean, supporting it with land-based fighter cover, long-range persistent ISR/T platforms like the MQ-9 Protector UCAVs, and anti-submarine aircraft such as P-8 Poseidons. By shifting the burden for non-air combat tasks to ground-based aircraft, the UKCSG can also maximise its fighter complement once the UK purchases more F-35Bs.

41. A Mediterranean and Near Eastern focus also creates intra-NATO cooperative possibilities. Besides France, NATO's Mediterranean members lack robust naval capabilities, instead operating a handful of modern surface combatants alongside aging surface warships and big-deck amphibious assault ships. But if these capabilities are combined – and particularly if Italy and Spain can be convinced to use their “aircraft carriers” for anti-submarine purposes – what were once disparate naval forces becomes a legitimate Strike Group, capable of curbing Russian influence in the Levantine Basin, denying hostile actors access to Libya, and even deploying to the Indian Ocean if necessary. Post-Iraq fatigue and the American exit from Afghanistan has made Near Eastern and North African military intervention politically unpalatable. Given the region's internal dynamics and the interests of predatory great powers, however, it is near-inevitable that NATO will soon need to consider Mediterranean issues. A Mediterranean-Middle Eastern “Tilt” would maximise the UK's aggregate contribution to NATO security, also allowing it to conduct operations within the limits British force structure imposes.
42. If HMG is set upon the Indo-Pacific Tilt, however it must cultivate more robust operational relationships with its Asian partners. ss

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