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The Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum is a think-tank based at the University of Cambridge researching the politics and international relations of the MENA region, with a view to improving and strengthening British foreign policy.

Summary:

1. The Indo-Pacific is of vital importance to British foreign policy and grand strategy, given the impact of China's rise and Sino-American antagonism on British interests.
2. However, British capability limitations advise against a distinctly military Indo-Pacific "tilt". The structure of global competition suggests that a presence in other regions is more sensible role for the UK to adopt; most notably in the Middle East's maritime littorals.
3. A "tilt" to the Middle East is more apt for British capabilities and would allow the UK to maximise its contribution to the Anglo-American alliance within the limits of its capacity.
4. In the Indo-Pacific, British diplomatic and political leverage would be best spent managing the rivalry between India and Pakistan, given its historical links with both countries, and the necessity of precluding a wholesale Pakistani realignment with China.

Eurasian Competition in Historical Context:

5. While trans-Eurasian trade existed before the early 16th century, no single power or coalition could coordinate effectively enough to control large swathes of territory without resorting to proxies.
6. Following with the arrival of Europeans to America and increased European maritime transit to India, the geopolitics of Eurasia became more deeply integrated. We call this not *globalisation*, but *Eurasianisation*, denoting the tendency for regional competition to occur in the context of broader Eurasian competition.
7. Until the rise of modern China, no aspiring world hegemon has been European. Under Mao, for all China's ideological fervour, China was too disorganised and politically volatile to rival the Soviet Union as an aspiring hegemon.
8. As a result, throughout the world wars and the Cold War, American strategists and their allied counterparts could conceive of Eurasian competition as fundamentally *European* competition.
9. Today, the central axis of global competition is squarely in the Indo-Pacific, yet the competition remains for Eurasia as a whole.

Eurasian Competition Today:

10. China's goal is to control enough of Eurasia's littorals, through either a direct military presence or favourable political and economic relationships, in order to ensure that the Chinese Communist Party and its state-capitalist system can access the resources and tribute it requires for the Chinese Communist Party to survive.
11. The U.S. has the same objective that it had in the 20th Century, which it inherited from the UK: denying any power or coalition from achieving control of Eurasia, which would afford access to its resources and the power to subjugate other nations.
12. Britain shares this goal and has a clear interest in preventing Chinese domination of the Indo-Pacific, as such an outcome would pose a mortal threat to British economic security and sovereignty.
13. Yet as in previous periods of global competition, it is not only the *apparent* political or military focal region that holds strategic relevance. The "pivot point" of global competition may be drastically different than what we might term the "decisive theatre" of confrontation.

14. We maintain that in today's Eurasian competition, the Middle East is the "pivot point" while the Indo-Pacific is the "decisive theatre". The reason for this is primarily naval.
15. Maritime transport remains the most efficient means to move bulk cargo, and our modern informational economy still relies upon ships and merchant sailors. The Middle East's maritime littorals are the vital connection point between Europe and Asia.
16. Petrochemical flows merely compound this importance, given the reliance of European economies, and to an even greater extent China, Japan, and other Chinese rivals, on oil.
17. Control of the Middle East is therefore of vital importance in Sino-American competition. It is in this context that Britain must consider its "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific.
18. The Indo-Pacific military balance is of central relevance to British interests. Yet other regions, foremost among them the Middle East, must be considered.
19. The U.S. has made it clear that it wishes to redistribute rapidly its military forces to the Indo-Pacific. America's withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely a prelude to a broader realignment, under which the U.S. scales down its Middle Eastern presence even more.
20. Being an effective partner requires that the UK simultaneously articulate to the U.S. the dangers of departing from the Middle East and use its capabilities to cover the gaps a U.S. drawdown will create.

Britain and the Tilt:

21. In "tilting" towards the Indo-Pacific, the government hopes to transform the UK into a major actor in what is perceived as *the* region of consequence for global politics. To do so, it seeks to use the Royal Navy's higher-end capabilities in concert with regional allies.
22. The logic behind this decision is sound: China's communist rhetoric and its Orwellian merger of autocracy and surveillance technology are salient reminders that a world in which China is preminent would be hostile to liberal democratic values. China's rise is clearly a threat to all maritime nations and liberal democracies.
23. It would be absurd for the UK to ignore the shifting Indo-Pacific balance of power and in view of the nature of maritime logistics, Chinese sea control in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean would leave the UK at Beijing's mercy.
24. Nevertheless, clear limits in British capabilities undermine the case for a robust military deployment to the Indo-Pacific.
25. The UK's Carrier Strike Group (UKCSG) contains an American and a Dutch surface warship because the Royal Navy lacks the large surface combatants to run escorts without support, as five of six Type-45 air defence destroyers are undergoing some form of maintenance or repair.
26. The HMS *Queen Elizabeth* has only eight British fixed-wing combat aircraft in its Carrier Air Wing (CVW) – the other ten are American F-35Bs.
27. The *Elizabeth*-class carrier lacks a catapult, limiting its future air wing composition to vertical or short take-off capable manned or unmanned aircraft, which precludes the option of attaching a dedicated range extender or fixed-wing ISR/T platform to its CVW.
28. While a formal basing agreement with Australia would help, the range at which the UKCSG must operate is prohibitive for consistent deployments.
29. Additionally, given the limitations on the *Elizabeth*-class' CVW, a UKCSG will be unable to impact the Eastern Pacific balance of power without extreme investments in and the rapid deployment of long-range air-launched missiles.
30. At most, the UKCSG could police the sea lanes that run to the Straits of Malacca and Lombok during a "far blockade" of China during a broader Pacific War. Yet no indication exists yet that the US and its allies have adopted the far blockade as an explicit strategy.

Picking up the Slack

31. To best act in concert with the United States, the United Kingdom and other capable European allies should prioritise freeing capacity for American engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.
32. Despite the aforementioned restrictions, British capabilities do allow for a greater presence in the Middle East's maritime littorals, which the United States has demonstrated its intention to neglect. The Eastern Mediterranean is the most viable area for immediate British engagement.
33. The strategic benefits of a greater British presence in the Middle East would be two.
34. First, it would make the notional "far blockade" of China during an Indo-Pacific war far more feasible. By controlling the Middle East's maritime littorals, the UK could resist Chinese pressure to disrupt the West's regional alliances, thereby ensuring that the US and its allies can turn off the metaphorical tap for China's energy supply.
35. Second, a permanent presence would give the UK much greater sway as a prospective broker and mediator over conflicts between the Gulf states, Israel, Iran, and Turkey, allowing it to support a coherent anti-Iranian *entente* and to be a counterweight to the gravitation of those states towards Russia and China.
36. RAF Akrotiri has a 2,700-metre-long runway, capable of hosting almost every combat aircraft in the RAF's inventory. It is a viable air base for Middle Eastern operations, as its use for strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) demonstrated.
37. A greater RAF presence in the Eastern Mediterranean would reduce pressure on the UKCSG's air wing. The UKCSG could rely on the RAF's land-based P-8 Poseidon variants, and possibly its Protector RG1 UCAVs if they are equipped with maritime ISR/T technology, for anti-surface and anti-submarine support, and on land-based range extenders also stationed at RAF Akrotiri for longer-range operations.
38. The UK has a long strategic history and a wealth of experience operating in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean and is well placed to alleviate American capacity in the Gulf. Operable base infrastructure already exists. The UAE's Jebel Ali Port is capable of hosting U.S. carriers, making it a viable station for the smaller *Elizabeth*-class ships. The new UK Joint Logistics Support Base in Duqm, Oman, can also host *Elizabeth*-class carriers operating in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.
39. Moreover, the RAF already maintains bases in Oman and the UAE jointly with and independent of the US, again making land-based air support viable.
40. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the UK, within the next two years, could have a semi-regular carrier and ground-based air force presence in the Middle East's maritime littorals, and have a permanent carrier and air force presence once the HMS *Prince of Wales* reaches the fleet in 2023.
41. Despite their limitations, the *Elizabeth*-class carriers are capable of influencing the Middle East's balance of forces far more reasonably than the Indo-Pacific balance.
42. Since 2014, the US has used a combination of CSGs and Expeditionary Strike Groups (ESGs) to maintain its Middle Eastern naval presence.
43. An American ESG centres upon a big-deck amphibious warship like the *America*-class LHA – the "Flight 0" LHAs have only a slightly smaller fixed-wing CVW than the *Elizabeth*-class. Iran does have a shorter-range anti-ship missile arsenal, but defeating its conventional anti-ship and anti-air capabilities is far less difficult than defeating China's comparable capabilities.
44. The F-35B's smaller payload when compared to non-stealth carrier-launched aircraft is far less problematic in the Middle East than in the Indo-Pacific, given the largely irregular, below-threshold nature of the threats that Iran and jihadist organisations pose to British and allied interests.

45. An increased British military emphasis on the Middle East may be more feasible than an Indo-Pacific tilt. Yet this does not imply that the UK has no role to play in the Indo-Pacific.
46. On the contrary, the Afghan withdrawal gives the UK a central Middle Eastern *diplomatic* role, given the increasing intersection between Indo-Pakistani and Sino-American rivalry.
47. Throughout the Cold War, Indo-Pakistani rivalry had an indirect impact on the broader US-Soviet balance. Pakistan was a Western ally, while the Sino-Indian War and Sino-Soviet Split precluded the possibility of a Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi axis. India maintained close ties with Russia, turning to it as a primary economic benefactor and defence supplier. But India lacked the naval capabilities or desire to spoil Western sea control in the Indian Ocean, while Pakistan or China remained its military rivals, rather than the US or West more broadly.
48. Conversely, the contemporary Indo-Pakistani rivalry intersects directly with Sino-American antagonism. Pakistan and the US were at odds in 2001 and remained so throughout American intervention in Afghanistan.
49. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has strengthened Sino-Pakistani relations: the CCP views Pakistan as the backstop of its broader Middle East policy, and a critical link to the Indian Ocean that circumvents the Malacca and Lombok Straits.
50. Additionally, China is now a major Pakistani defence supplier. By contrast, India retains reasonable links with Russia, but increasingly has turned to the US and its allies as it recognises the threat that China poses.
51. India is a member of the “Quad”, the burgeoning alliance between the US, Japan, Australia, and India that, along with AUKUS, will serve as the political core of an anti-Chinese coalition. Indian naval capabilities are growing, and its 15-boat submarine fleet, combined with its surface warships, would be useful in policing the Malacca and Lombok Straits and the Indian Ocean’s sea lanes.
52. American withdrawal from Afghanistan has removed the central mitigating factor to deteriorating US-Pakistani relations.
53. Despite Pakistan’s interest in supporting the Taliban, US presence mitigated the degree to which its opposition to the US-backed government could trigger a broader diplomatic crisis.
54. Moreover, the Taliban’s growth in Pakistan did necessitate American-Pakistani military and intelligence cooperation.
55. Absent an American presence in Afghanistan, and considering Pakistan’s increasing economic and military-technological reliance upon China, a rupture is now possible.
56. Pakistan’s access to American military technology, strategic position, and extant military capabilities would make a formal rupture extremely damaging to US and allied interests.
57. The United Kingdom has only a limited military and economic relationship with India and Pakistan, given its status as a middle power. However, it retains strong cultural connections to both countries, a fact that facilitated the recent UK-India 2030 Roadmap.
58. The UK may play an outsized political and diplomatic role in preventing Pakistani-American tensions from linking too strongly with Indo-Pakistani rivalry, and triggering a formal Pakistani realignment against the US and its allies.