

Written evidence submitted by James Jennion (TIP0020)

Introduction

1. In this submission I will share some observations I feel will be useful based on the research I conducted while working for the Committee. These are my own views as an individual.
2. Rather than make high-level foreign policy recommendations – which are already covered by people with far more experience than I have – I focus this submission on areas where the Committee may wish to recommend the Government articulate clearer policy and strategy. This is based on the past two and a half years I have spent supporting the Committee’s scrutiny of the Government’s foreign policy, with a particular focus on its activity in Asia.
3. The major issue with the Tilt is that we don’t yet know much of what the Government actually plans to *do*. AUKUS, CPTPP, the Build Back Better World (B3W) Initiative, and ASEAN Dialogue Partnership are all big-picture iterations of the Tilt, but specific detail is thin on the ground. More detail will naturally come with time, but the Government should proactively share that detail with Parliament as it emerges.
4. The importance of clarity on this issue cannot be overstated. The Tilt is a cornerstone of the UK’s post-Brexit foreign policy and future international identity. It is crucial that Parliament, the public, and civil society have clear understanding of exactly what the Government plans to achieve in the Indo-Pacific – and how it plans to do so – in order to hold decision-makers to account.

The FCDO and China

5. The FCDO and HMG at large seriously lack China capability. FCDO teams rely too heavily on rotated generalists who lack substantive experience and knowledge of China. The Government should ramp up its Civil Service-wide drive to recruit staff with experience of living, studying, and working in China. This should also include people with advanced Chinese language skills, which are strangely under-regarded in Whitehall.
6. The same should apply thematically. The Government has agreed to introduce an annual day of training on forced labour awareness for trade-focused officials on the back of the Xinjiang report. However, issues like forced labour, atrocity prevention, and human rights cannot be adequately addressed following a single day’s training or a single module at the International Academy. HMG, and the FCDO in particular, should explain how it intends to mainstream critical and complex themes like those above into the daily work and routines of officials, diplomats, and trade staff.
7. The Government has not articulated a coherent China strategy. The tension between the economic benefits of engagement with China and the Government’s desire for the UK to be a “force for good” has led to a muddled approach to China. This tension is exemplified by the half-hearted sanctions announced in March 2021, where some Communist Party officials were sanctioned over Xinjiang, but nobody of real seniority was held accountable. This fundamentally self-contradictory approach to China has led to a Department – and Government – which is attempting to look and work in opposite directions. The House of Lords International Relations and Defence

Committee just reiterated a call for a coherent China policy. It is doubtful that another recommendation toward a China policy from FAC will yield a different response so soon, but pressing the Government to explain how it plans to reconcile the economics/values dilemma in its relations with China would be worthwhile.

8. The Government should make a much greater effort to honour parliamentary deadlines. Lateness of Department submissions to inquiries and Government responses to Committee reports cause substantial impediment to the work of Parliament in scrutinising Government policy. At the time of my departure from the role, the FCDO had not submitted evidence to this inquiry, despite multiple extensions and requests since the inquiry launched in July. It is difficult to scrutinise the Tilt to the Indo-Pacific when the Government has not even explained where it regards the Indo-Pacific to be.¹ Where submissions or responses are delayed by more than two weeks, a Minister should write to the Committee Chair explaining why this is the case.

AUKUS

9. Given the recency of AUKUS, lack of information on this new pact is understandable. However, the Government has not yet made clear what it expects the UK's particular role in AUKUS to be. Speculation remains as to whether the UK, or the USA, or both, will be providing Australia with the nuclear submarines. The Committee may wish to question the Government on what the specific benefits of AUKUS are to the UK, both in economic and defence/security terms. For example, does it expect to secure permission to use Australian bases to conduct maintenance on British submarines?

ASEAN Dialogue Partnership

10. While the Government has touted ASEAN Dialogue Partnership as a diplomatic win, it has not articulated what it actually intends to do with this status. Much of the written evidence to both this inquiry and the Myanmar inquiry cautioned against expecting too much too quickly from ASEAN. The Committee might ask the Government to indicate what its medium- to long-term plans are for engagement with ASEAN, what it hopes to accomplish, and how it plans to do so.

Build Back Better World (B3W) Initiative

11. The development projects of Western democracies have a serious branding issue. There is not yet clarity over the relationship between the Clean Green Initiative (CGI), the G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) Initiative, and the new British International Investment (BII). CGI and B3W have been spoken of as the same project under different names, and as different projects. The Government should explain how CGI and BII fit into the B3W initiative – for example, specific areas where governments and private sector companies of different countries will contribute and cooperate, how the relative strengths of participating countries will be best utilised. If this initiative or range of initiatives is to have any hope of competing with the ideational and soft power aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative, it must be clear how the different approaches of G7 countries form a cohesive whole. At present, the approach appears scattered and disunified.

¹ Language in the IR essentially equates the Indo-Pacific with the Asia-Pacific region.

12. To remedy this, the UK might push to codify a series of principles that G7 powers and Western democracies agree to work towards. This way at least, different projects will be seen to work towards the same overall outcomes even if the ways of getting there differ, giving them a coherent umbrella to work under.
13. All development projects under B3W/CGI/BII banners should focus on a localised approach which serves to support partner countries. BRI projects are cheap and quick, but are not known for their high standards, and often prioritise Chinese workers over local workers. As Martin Thorley says, the UK is a 'regulatory superpower', and this is a strength that the UK should play to. Consultation with partner countries to assess local need, deliver high-standard projects, and support local communities should be the focus here.

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